# THE SEVEN REMAINING TRIBES

# JOSHUA 18-21



T. M. Moore A Scriptorium Study from The Fellowship of Ailbe

# **The Fellowship of Ailbe**

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# Joshua 18-21: Introduction

The land is conquered. Sort of. Enough, at least, for Joshua to proceed with dividing the rest of the land west of the Jordan River between the remaining seven tribes.

These lists and lists can be difficult reading, but they remind us both of how great are the promises of God, and how much work must be done to claim and live in those promises.

The tribes of Israel must have rejoiced to hear their names and allotments read. We should rejoice as well, as these lists and allotments remind us to count our daily blessings from the Lord.

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# 1 Joshua Charges the Tribes

## Read Joshua 18.1-10.

Reflect.

1. What significance should we attach to the fact that the congregation of the children of Israel set up the tabernacle of the Lord at a place called *Shiloh* (cf. Gen. 49.8-11)?

2. The rest of the tribal allotments would be arranged according to lot around the allotments given to Judah and the sons of Joseph (Ephraim and Manasseh). Why did this make sense?

## Think about it.

It is significant that Joshua chose Shiloh as the place to set up God's tabernacle and finish assigning the allotments to the remaining seven tribes. The word *Shiloh* is a contraction in the Hebrew language of three words, which translates literally as "which to him" and means something like "Him Whose it is." In Genesis 49.8-11, Shiloh is envisioned as a Person, the last in the line of kings descending from Judah. Shiloh is our Lord Jesus Christ, and "it" – the Kingdom and promises and people of God – belongs to Him. God pitched His tabernacle in Shiloh (Jer. 7.12; Jn. 1.14), and from Shiloh the promises of God are distributed among His people.

The people had stalled in securing the portion of the land allotted to them. They were not laying hold on God's promises, and so were in danger of languishing, and of allowing the promised land to remain in pagan hands. Joshua exhorted them to continue striving to gain their inheritance; and to motivate them, he commissioned men from the remaining tribes to survey the land and bring back a report. He would use that report to assign the allotments for the seven remaining tribes.

We are not likely to take the risk or make the effort to gain the promises of God unless we see those promises as desirable above all else. All the promises of God are Yes and Amen in Jesus Christ. Like those 21 surveyors sent out by Joshua, we must work at enlarging and clarifying our vision of Jesus, and of what our world will look like as He fills all things with Himself (Eph. 4.8-10), outlining in detail the promises of God and preparing to undertake the work of securing them. God's shepherds are appointed to scout out the promises of God for us and to show us how lovely everything will be as Jesus fills the world with Himself. This is the work of leading the sheep which Jesus appointed to His shepherds (Jn. 10.1-5). The shepherds must further equip, exhort, organize, and direct us in laying hold of the promises of God in our own Personal Mission Field.

Then, our vision of Jesus and His promises firmly in mind, and our desire for Him heightened, we will, like those remaining seven tribes, take up the hard work of claiming those promises and resting and rejoicing in Him.

## Meditate and discuss.

1. In the word Shiloh, "it" includes the Kingdom, promises, and people who believe in Jesus. What are the implications of this for you?

2. How clear in your mind are the precious and very great promises of God (2 Pet. 1.4)? Would you say that these promises guide your daily planning and activities? Explain.

3. What is your responsibility for equipping and exhorting your fellow believers to take up the work of laying

## hold on the promises of God?

"But although a station for the ark was then chosen, it was not a perpetual abode, but only a temporary lodging. For it was not left to the will or suffrages of the people to fix the seat where God should dwell, but they behooved to wait for the period so often referred to in the Law, when he was to establish the memorial of his name elsewhere." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

Lord, I belong to You, and Your promises belong to me! Help me to gain more of Your precious and very great promises as I...

## Pray Psalm 44.1-8.

Thank God for the way Joshua led Israel to lay hold on the promised land, and for how our greater Joshua – our Lord Jesus – has opened the way through Himself into the precious and very great promises of God. Ask the Lord for victories today in gaining more of His promises.

## Psalm 44.1-8, 23-26 (Faithfulness: Great is Thy Faithfulness)

O God our ears have heard, ancients have taught us, All that You did for them long years ago, How by Your hand You defeated the nations, And to the promised land let Israel go. *Refrain vv. 23-26* Rise up, awake, O Lord! Hide not Your face from us, See our affliction, our suffering and pain! See how our soul is sunk down with oppression; Rise up and help and redeem us we pray!

Not by their sword did they drive out the nations; Not by their arm did they settle the land. Your saving mercy and light triumphed for them: Victories for us, our King, please now command. *Refrain* 

Through You shall we all our enemies vanquish; Them will we trample in Your mighty Name. We will not trust in our strength or our wisdom; Jesus will save us; we'll boast of His fame! *Refrain* 

## 2 Benjamin

## Read Joshua 18.11-28.

## Reflect.

1. Why do you suppose Benjamin's allotment was squeezed in between Judah and Ephraim?

2. Benjamin was a smaller tribe, but were God's expectations of them any smaller than what He expected of the larger tribes?

## Think about it.

The allotment for Benjamin was squeezed in between those of Ephraim and Judah. One of the smaller tribes, Benjamin would become a source of great pain and distress for the nation toward the end of the period of the judges.

This is a smaller allotment because the tribe of Benjamin was one of the smaller of the twelve tribes. Perhaps this is why they were cushioned between the two powerful tribes of Judah and Ephraim – both for their protection and to keep some distance between competing tribes.

Only twenty-six cities were needed to house the people of Benjamin. But, though a small tribe, with smaller territory and fewer cities, the people of Benjamin had just as much opportunity to serve and honor God in their cities and lands. Size is not important. What matters is being faithful to the Lord and honoring Him in all we do.

Curious in the list of these cities is Jebus (Jerusalem). This was previously assigned to Judah; at least, it was Judah's responsibility to drive the Jebusites out (Josh. 15.63). Now those strong and stubborn pagans would continue smack in the middle of one of the smallest tribes, in a strategic place in the nation.

That can't be a good thing.

## Meditate and discuss.

1. In Christianity today, we tend to think that size matters. The bigger our church, the more varied our programs, the better. Is this a good way to think about church health? Why or why not?

2. Can small churches honor and serve God as effectively as larger churches? Explain.

3. The city of Jebus (Jerusalem) is mentioned here as assigned to Benjamin (v. 28). It must have been transferred from the allotment to Judah, just as part of Judah's inheritance would be tapped for the tribe of Simeon. Why do you suppose the writer chose not to mention that this city was still in Canaanite hands? Does not facing up to such a fact make it simply go away?

"In the lot of Benjamin nothing occurs particularly deserving of notice, unless that a small tribe takes precedence of the others. I admit, indeed, that its limits were narrowed in proportion to the fewness of its numbers, because it obtained only twenty-six cities; but still an honor was bestowed upon it in the mere circumstance of its receiving its inheritance before more distinguished tribes... It is strange, however, that having obtained such a quiet locality, they did not live on peaceful and friendly terms with their neighbors." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

Lord, my calling may be a "small" one, but it matters to You and to the people to whom You send me each day. Help me today

*to*...

*Pray Psalm 139.23, 24.* Listen as the Lord searches your soul and life. Confess any sins and repent as the Lord leads.

## Psalm 139.23, 24 (Ripley: Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah, O My Soul)

Search my heart, O Lord, and know me, as You only, Lord, can do. Test my thoughts and contemplations, whether they be vain or true. Let there be no sin in me, Lord, nothing that Your Spirit grieves. Lead me in the righteous way, Lord, unto everlasting peace!

# 3 Simeon, Zebulun, Issachar, Asher, Naphtali, and Dan

## Read Joshua 19.1-48.

Reflect.

1. We note an adjustment made to the inheritance assigned to Judah. This should not trouble us. Why not?

2. This can be tedious reading, but why was it important to record these allotments? How can you read them with profit to your soul?

## Think about it.

While these sections dutifully record the allotments of land and cities to the tribes of Israel, and they were very important as a permanent record for the nation, they can be difficult reading. We can't see in our mind's eye where these cities are, or even how the various tribal groups relate to one another (having a map handy can help).

But more than just records of cities and lands, these are detailed accounts of the faithfulness of God to all His people. In a sense, the writer is counting the blessings of God to Israel, and thus tallying up the record of God's faithfulness to His Word and promises. These passages encourage us to be just as detailed in tallying up the daily blessings of God and in giving Him thanks and praise. Here is a way to extend your communion with the Lord throughout the day, by making note and giving thanks for each blessing, great or small.

In the lands of these six tribes we see no mention of Canaanites remaining. That doesn't mean they didn't. As the book of Judges shows, the struggle against paganism continued for many generations throughout all Israel. Indeed, victory over the Canaanites would only come during David's reign, only to be squandered by his son and grandson.

Count your blessings. Seek more of the promises of God. Don't leave anything for the ways of the world. These are the lessons of this section of the book of Joshua.

## Meditate and discuss.

1. Why is it a good idea to count our blessings every day? How can doing so help to improve our relationship with the Lord?

2. We notice that these accounts give specific names, places, and even numbers. Is there any guidance here for us, as we work at being more faithful in actually counting our blessings?

3. We are called to seek and advance the Kingdom and glory of God in our lives and our Personal Mission Fields. What can hinder us from doing this? Should we ever give up on this objective?

"And indeed we said above that even our Lord Jesus Christ asks us for a place he may build and in which he may live and that we ought to become so clean of heart, and so sincere of mind, so holy in body and spirit, that he may both deign to accept this place in our soul and to build it and dwell in it. And who do you think among all the people are so acceptable to God that they are worthy to be chosen for this? Or perhaps no individuals can be capable of this, but can the whole people and all the church together barely be capable of receiving the Lord Jesus in themselves so that he may dwell in them?" Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD)

Make me alert to all Your blessings, Lord, that I may recount them to You with thanks and praise, and that...

Pray Psalm 111.

This psalm presents the large backdrop of God's promises – His works of creation, sovereignty, redemption, and His covenant. Meditate on each of these as you pray, and thank God for how these large blessings redound to your benefit each day.

**Psalm 111** (*Manoah: When All Your Mercies, O My God*) Praise the Lord! O let my heart give thanks here amid His chosen race! Your works are great, O Lord, and sought by all who know their grace.

For Your work is full of splendor, Lord, and of majesty most pure; Your righteousness, O glorious God, forever will endure!

You have caused Your many wondrous works to remain before our face. For You are full of mercy, Lord, and abounding all in grace.

For all who fear You, You provide; Your covenant endures. Your pow'r You show Your people, Lord, and make the nations theirs.

The works of Your all-sovereign hands are faithful, Lord, and just. Your precepts ever more are true and worthy of our trust.

You have sent redemption, to us, Lord, in Christ of cov'nant fame, And we in wonder, grace, and awe adore Your holy Name.

All they who would true wisdom know must learn to fear You, Lord, And in that wisdom daily live and praise You evermore.

# 4 An Inheritance for Joshua

## Read Joshua 19.49-51.

Reflect.

1. Why do you suppose they waited until last to provide an allotment for Joshua?

2. Joshua seems to have been content to receive his inheritance, improve and develop it, and dwell peacefully in it. As leader of the people of Israel, is he forgetting something (cf. Jdgs. 2.7-10)?

## Think about it.

I doubt that Joshua's being given his inheritance last was an oversight. His tribe, Ephraim, had already received their allotment. Now he was being granted the request which the Lord had laid on his heart, that he might have the city of Timnath Serah in Ephraim. By acclamation, "the children of Israel" – not just the tribal heads of Ephraim – granted Joshua's request, a gesture of unanimity expressing both appreciation and honor.

It is a measure of Joshua's humility that, as leader of the victorious tribes, he did not insist on having his choice of all the properties in Israel, and having it first, before everyone else started carving up the land. He waited until all the tribal allotments had been made, then requested his allotment within the territory of his tribe.

We receive here a little more information about how these allotments were made. The land was surveyed by representatives of all the tribes. Then, in the presence of the Lord and before His tabernacle, tribal leaders cast lots for the territories west of the Jordan River, as the Lord led them. Beginning with Judah and the sons of Joseph, they appointed lands to the tribes according to their size and other characteristics. The casting of lots related to the order of the appointments. The actual assignment of lands was then made, following the detailed survey, according to the size and other needs of the individual tribes, in the order determined by the lots. Each tribal head probably had a stone or wooden piece with the name of their tribe incised, which they cast into a pile to determine, by some means, which tribal allotment should be honored next.

Joshua retired to his appointed city and concentrated on developing and dwelling in it. Although Moses had taken great care to prepare Joshua for leadership after he died, we see no such concern on Joshua's part. Nor did God call him to appoint someone after him to carry on his leadership. Was this an oversight on Joshua's part? Or was he merely assuming the various tribal heads would do their duty? We don't know. What we do know is that, in the generation following these leaders, Israel was not prepared for the work that remained or the challenges they would face with pagan peoples still living in their midst.

## Meditate and discuss.

1. What do you think: Did Joshua fail by not training a leader to succeed him? Or at least making sure the various tribal heads were leading as they should?

2. This process seems to have been accomplished in an orderly, spiritual, albeit random manner. Explain. What can we learn about discerning the Lord's will from the process of allotting these inheritances?

3. Our text notes that "they made an end of dividing the country." But was that the end of their work? Is there ever an end to the work of claiming God's promises?

Let us see, therefore, what is this place in which Jesus is bound to dwell. In Mount Ephraim,' it says, that is, in the fruit-bearing

mountain. Who do you think among us are fruit-bearing mountains, in whom Jesus may dwell? Surely those in whom exist 'the fruit of the Spirit: joy, peace, patience, love,' and the rest. Those, therefore, are the fruit-bearing mountains who produce the fruit of the Spirit and who are always lofty in mind and expectation." Origen of Alexandria (185-254 AD)

Thank You, for the "allotment" You have assigned to me in my Personal Mission Field. Today, help me to...

## Pray Psalm 126.

Daily we must work out our salvation in fear and trembling (Phil. 2.12), sowing to the Spirit rather than to the flesh (Gal. 6.7-10). As you pray this psalm, weep with repentance for any sins, and seek the Lord for the "sowing" of the coming day.

**Psalm 126** (*Truro: Shout, for the Blessed Jesus Reigns*) When God restored our fortunes all, We were like those who sweetly dream. Our mouths with joy and laughter filled, Made Him our constant song and theme.

Then the astonished nations said, "The Lord has done great things for them!" Indeed, great things our God has done, Whose Name we praise, Amen, Amen!

Restore our fortunes, Lord our King! Let grace like flowing streams prevail. All they with tears of joy shall sing Who sow while yet they weep and wail.

They who in tears of sorrow sow And cast their seed on every hand, With joy shall reach their heav'nly home, And bring the harvest of their land.

## 5 Cities of Refuge

Read Joshua 20.1-9.

Reflect.

1. What was the purpose of the cities of refuge? What was accomplished by having these cities?

2. Who was eligible to take advantage of a city of refuge?

## Think about it.

The Law of God was given to Israel so that justice, reflecting the very character of God, could obtain throughout the land. No one was allowed to be a law unto himself or to take the law into his own hands. Elders and judges were to be established throughout the land, in every town, village, and city, to interpret and enforce the Law of God so that love for God and neighbors would everywhere prevail.

The cities of refuge served two purposes. First, they provided a safe haven for one who had caused the death of another person, but unintentionally and without malice aforethought. Such a person would have to stand before the "congregation" of judges in his own community, who would weigh the evidence and pronounce a verdict on the accused. But it might take time for all that to be accomplished. So to protect the individual who was the cause of death against possible vengeance, cities of refuge served as a temporary residence until his case could be adjudicated.

Second, if the local judges found that the death had indeed been unintentional, the accused might still be in danger of vengeful friends or relatives of the individual who had died. So to protect the life of the perpetrator, and to discourage those who might give in to fleshly passions and do harm to their neighbor, a convicted person could take up residence in the city of refuge for as long as the current high priest was alive. He had to remain in the city and not stray from it, lest, if he be found and vengeance taken against him, he would have no protection from the Law of God.

Cities of refuge were thus spread throughout the land, so that they could be easily accessible.

## Meditate and discuss.

1. What does this arrangement - cities of refuge - demonstrate about the justice of God?

2. Although the perpetrator would not be punished, he would be inconvenienced. How is this just?

3. Do you think the churches would benefit from a better understanding of the Law of God? Do you think communities would benefit if Christians were better informed about and more consistent in living God's Law? Explain.

"We may add, how important it was that there should be places of refuge for the innocent, in order that the land might not be polluted with blood. For if that remedy had not been provided, the kindred of those who had been killed would have doubled the evil, by proceeding without discrimination to avenge their death. It certainly did not become the people to be idle in guarding the land from stain and taint. Hence we perceive how tardy men are, not only to perform their duty, but to provide for their own safety, unless the Lord frequently urge them, and prick them forward by the stimulus of exhortation." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564.AD)

Lord, I will certainly sin unintentionally today. I am much more sinful than I know or admit. So help me, Father, to...

## Pray Psalm 19.12-14

Linger over these verses as you pray, waiting for the Lord to convict you of any sins you may have overlooked.

**Psalm 19.12-14** (*St. Christopher: Beneath the Cross of Jesus*) Who, Lord, can know his errors? O keep sin far from me! Let evil rule not in my soul that I may blameless be. O let my thoughts, let all my words, before Your glorious sight Be pleasing to You, gracious Lord, acceptable and right!

## 6 Cities for the Levites

## Read Joshua 21.1-45.

Reflect.

1. Why would it have been important for the Levites to be scattered throughout the various tribes of Israel?

2. The tribe of the Levites included the priests. What did priests and Levites do in Israel? Can you see that their placement among the tribes of Israel is a symbol or type of Jesus indwelling His Church?

## Think about it.

The tribe of Levi was divided into three sub-tribes: The children of Kohath, Gershon, and Merari. They are to be given cities among all the tribes, together with the common lands – probably for gardens and grazing of sheep – that went with those cities. A total of forty-eight cities were assigned to the priests and Levites. This meant that religious services would be available throughout the nation of Israel, and not just at the center point, Shiloh, where the tabernacle was pitched. The synagogue structure of religious and spiritual life, which is so prominent in the New Testament, began here.

This reading is again difficult, but as you read, think about the priests and Levites as a type of Christ, Who comes by His Spirit to dwell in all who believe in Him. The Levites worked to ensure that prayers, offerings, teaching, and love for God and neighbor existed in every tribe of Israel. The Lord's purpose for us is to increase those and other forms of spiritual life, so that we may be holy, as our Father in heaven is holy.

The closing pericope (vv. 43-45) comes with a "Whew!" – a sense of relief. No more lists! But the main point is to remind the readers (that would be us) that all the details of the dividing and apportioning of the land of promise were but steps in God's sovereign and personal care for all His people. These detailed lists of lands, borders, and cities encourage us to be as detailed in counting our blessings each day, that we may be faithful in serving Him.

While it was true that the people had "rest all around" and that they had taken possession of the land and were dwelling in it; and while it was also true that "not a man of all their enemies stood against them," still, the work was not finished (cf. Josh. 24.6-8). And it never would be finished. In the same way, we who believe in Jesus *are* saved (from sin and judgment), but we are *being saved daily* as we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. And we will one day *be saved* from all sin and its consequences in the new heavens and new earth with Jesus.

## Meditate and discuss.

1. As each tribe heard the list of cities and common lands assigned to them, how do you think that made them feel? Would they have been excited? Pleased? Do you suppose they looked at one another and gave thanks to God?

2. The purpose of this widespread disseminating of priests and Levites was to ensure sound worship and pure and holy living through all Israel? How is this a type of Christ's indwelling presence in our lives?

3. As far as our salvation is concerned, the war for our souls is over, but the battles continue. Why? What does God intend for us in having to carry on this struggle for His rest?

"Wherefore, although they did not rout them all so as to make their possession clear, yet the truth of God came visibly forth, and

was realized, inasmuch as they might have obtained what was remaining without any difficulty, had they been pleased to avail themselves of the victories offered to them." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

You have called me to work out my salvation in fear and trembling, O Lord, and I am determined that I will...

#### Pray Psalm 90.12-17.

We return to this psalm to prepare for the day's struggle. Wait in silence on the Lord to show the work you need to do today to enter more fully into His rest.

**Psalm 90.12-17** (*Landas: My Faith Has Found a Resting Place*) Lord, teach us all our days to note that wisdom may be ours. Return, O Lord, have pity on those servants who are Yours. Each morning let Your love appear that we for joy may sing. And make us glad for every day You us affliction bring.

Now let Your work to us appear; our children show Your might. And let Your favor rest on us; show mercy in Your sight. The work that You have given us, confirm, and to us show, That we Your chosen path may walk and in Your precepts go.

# 7 The Land Apportioned

Review Joshua 18-21.

Reflect.

1. As much detail as is provided in these four chapters, much more is omitted. Such as?

2. We must not miss the point of these chapters, and of the book of Joshua as a whole. Which is?

## Think about it.

I think a good way to read these chapters is to put ourselves down in the midst of the people of Israel as these allotments were being made. The survey of the land was complete, and those who made it had first-hand knowledge of the terrain and the cities to be occupied. But the people could only imagine what those towns and villages were like, what the hills or fields looked like, and how many occupants remained to be displaced.

What would the people have been thinking as they heard their tribes called out, the boundaries of their land described, and the list of cities and villages read out? They would certainly have felt a mixture of excitement and anxiousness as they thought about entering one of those cities, deciding where they should live, and setting up their homes and workshops.

So many details left unsaid! Sometimes it's in the things that are *not* revealed that we have the greatest opportunity to apply what *is* revealed to our own lives. Imagine yourself, first thing in the morning, rehearsing the events of the day ahead before the Lord in prayer – the places you'll go, the people you'll encounter there, the temptations or challenges likely to be present. What goes on in your mind as you think about claiming the promises of God, resisting and overcoming the enemies of the Lord, and laying hold on God's blessings for all aspects of your life? Surely the same must have gone through the minds of those ancient Israelites as they thought about removing from Shiloh to begin securing and occupying the dwelling places God had promised.

The more attention we give to the details of our lives, the more reason we will find to give thanks to God, and the more likely we will be to serve Him in all the places and situations to which He sends us as His chosen and holy people.

## Meditate and discuss.

1. How diligent are you each day to offer up the details of your day to the Lord in prayer? How might you improve in this?

2. What is your approach to planning the work you will do each day to lay hold on the promises of God?

3. How can believers help one another to be more faithful and diligent in working their Personal Mission Fields for the Lord?

"Whatever war the people undertook, in whatever direction they moved their standards, victory was prepared; nor was there any other delay or obstacle to their exterminating all their enemies than their own voluntary torpor. Wherefore, although they did not rout them all so as to make their possession clear, yet the truth of God came visibly forth, and was realized, inasmuch as they might have obtained what was remaining without any difficulty, had they been pleased to avail themselves of the victories offered to them." John Calvin, Commentary on Joshua (1509-1564 AD)

Lord, more careful and consistent attention to detail is important if I am to give You the thanks and praise You deserve, and if I

am to...

Pray Psalm 103.1-14.

Thank God for His promises and His faithfulness in granting you His blessings. Seek more of His presence, promises, and power as you rejoice in His goodness and prepare for the day ahead.

**Psalm 103.1-14** (*Old 100<sup>th</sup>: All Creatures That on Earth Do Dwell*) O my soul, bless the Lord's great Name! His many benefits proclaim: He pardons sins and heals disease, and from the pit grants us release.

With mercy rich and steadfast love He satisfies us from above, Revives our youth, works righteousness, and justice serves for the oppressed.

His ways to Moses He made known; to Israel His great works were shown. The Lord is full of mercy sweet, and with His favor does us meet.

To anger He but slowly goes; abounding love to us He shows. He will not always scold nor chide; His anger will not e'er abide.

Our sins He casts from us away; He shows compassion every day. He knows our frame, that we are dust, so on His goodness let us trust.

## Questions for reflection or discussion

- 1. We have said that Israel's work of conquering and settling the land is analogous to the Lord's work of sanctification in us. What can we learn about that work from these chapters?
- 2. How would all this detailing of the apportionment of the land have served future generations of Israelites?
- 3. Why is so much work necessary for realizing the promises of God?
- 4. What do these chapters teach us about God's sovereignty and the blessings He has in store for us?
- 5. What's the most important lesson you've learned from Joshua 18-21? How are you putting that lesson to work in your walk with and work for the Lord?

For prayer:

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