

A theology of child rearing for Nigerian fathers: A socio-rhetorical reading of Ephesians 6:4

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One of the major causes of juvenile delinquency almost anywhere in the world, including Nigeria, is abusive conditions in the homes. The abusive condition in the Nigerian situation is exacerbated by the authoritarian concept of the home. Children are usually seen as mere objects who are to obey their parents, especially the father who has an absolute power over his children. Christian parents too are guilty of being authoritarian and their favourite cliché is 'children, obey your parents'. This article aims at developing a theological guideline that would assist fathers in rearing their children from the biblical perspective via a socio-rhetorical study of Ephesians 6:4. It examines the rearing of children in the 1st century among the Jews and the Graeco-Romans – the original recipients. Then, it compares the social condition of Nigeria with that of the 1st century Graeco-Roman. It concludes by stating that the key to understanding the verse is the phrase *μὴ παροργίζετε*, a combination of *μὴ* and a present active imperative, which is used to prohibit actions already in progress. Thus, the verse becomes an appeal to fathers to stop exasperating their children. To achieve this, fathers should see their children as full-fledged human beings with a right to their opinions and decisions about their lives.

Contribution: This article holds that rather than being treated as obedient objects to fathers in all things, children must be seen as human beings created with will, mind and intelligence and therefore be given a say in issues that concerns them and be disciplined in love and not harshly.

Keywords: New Testament; Pauline Epistles; Ephesians; household codes; parenting.

Introduction

Like most other cultures, the Nigerian father figure model has always been tailored along 'the breadwinner model' (Sarfaraz, Beno & Yasan 2021:17), which comes along with the concept of authoritarianism. Children are usually seen as mere objects who are to obey their parents, as authoritarianism is characterised by a high expectation of conformity and compliance to the father's rules and directions without any explanation (Alika, Akanni & Akanni 2016:103). Confirming the prevalence of authoritarianism in Nigeria, a 2014 United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) study reveals that about four in five children between the ages of 2 and 14, which represents about 91% of the sample had experienced violent discipline at home in the month prior to the survey (Ofoha & Ogidan, 2020:90). Fatimilehin and Hassan (2016:126) attributed the prevalence of harsh discipline in Nigeria to its being 'a deep-rooted cultural practice of controlling children's behaviour [which] is passed on from one generation to the next'. If as revealed here, 91% of the sample used are experiencing violent discipline at home, one can safely deduce that fathers who are Christians too are guilty of using authoritarian rule over their children. Their favourite clichés are 'children, obey your parents' or 'spare the rod and spoil the child', which are passages of the Bible. Unfortunately, fathers do not seem to recognise the danger involved in being authoritarian as they continue risking their children having 'self-esteem problems, behavioural problems, poor academic performance, poor skills, aggressiveness and anger towards parents' (Lawal & Usman 2020:5). This article aims at developing guidelines that would assist fathers in rearing their children from the biblical point of view via a socio-rhetorical exegesis of Ephesians 6:4. It examines parenting of children in the 1st-century world, to which the passage was originally directed and that in Nigeria to ascertain the relevance of the Ephesian house codes to the Nigerian fathers. It concludes by highlighting the guidelines derived from Ephesians 6:4.

Fathers and children in the 1st century Ephesus

Ephesus was situated on the west coast of Asia Minor and was ranked as one of the greatest cities of the Roman empire. During Paul's time, Artemis (Diana) was the most prominent and significant

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cult in Ephesus with several other deities in existence (Arnold 1993:245). Acts 19:8 confirms the presence of a Jewish synagogue in Ephesus and Josephus corroborated this (Josephus Antiquity 14.10.11–12 §§223–227). The church in Ephesus is a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. 'Although there were many Jewish Christians in the churches of the region, the flood of new Gentile converts created some significant tension' (Arnold 1993:246). Thus, to have a good picture of the relationship between fathers and children at the Ephesian church, there is the need to look at the relationship between fathers and children within the Graeco-Roman families.

Commenting on lots of children in the Graeco-Roman society, Keener (2014) says that:

Greek and Roman society was even harsher on new-born children; because an infant was accepted as a legal person only when the father officially recognised it, babies could be abandoned or, if deformed, killed. (p. 553).

Child exposure or child abandonment was common in the Graeco-Roman empire:

[T]his treatment was inflicted on large numbers of children, whose physical reliability and legitimacy were not in doubt. It was much the commonest, though not the only, way in which infants were killed, and in many, perhaps most, regions it was a familiar phenomenon (Harris 1994:1).

Harris (1994) lists the main four reasons for child exposure as follows:

- Deformity or other physical inadequacy of the new-born infant
- Its illegitimacy
- Perceived economic need
- Evil omens and despair (p. 9)

The consequence of child abandonment is negative. If the child survives death, it ends up as a slave or gladiator. Harris (1994) said:

[M]any exposed infants did in fact survive, especially in regions where – and at times when – the demand for slaves was high. For enslavement was much the commonest fate of foundlings. (p. 9)

Fathers who intended death for such children exposed them nakedly because that 'was a sign of a paterfamilias who was especially determined that the child should die' (p. 9).

Another negative common practice is the selling of children. Although there are divergent views on this, it is nevertheless a practice that is usually overlooked. A scholar commented thus:

As pointed out, the selling of children by their parents was never penalised, not even prohibited *expressis verbis* in Roman legislation. The selling was seen as a part of the parental authority and thus it could not be criminalised as such – even if the sale itself was indubitably invalid. (Vuolanto 2003:186)

This quotation shows that although some scholars say this practice was frowned at, it is however permitted because there was no law against it.

Finally, it is the issue of flogging children in the name of discipline and education. In the Graeco-Roman period, whipping was seen as part of the education process. Keener (2014) said, 'children were often taught through beating, which was standard in child rearing and education' (p. 553). With all these, the Graeco-Roman world was not one that was favourable to the development and the well-being of a child.

Fathers and children in contemporary Nigerian situation

Like the Graeco-Roman setting, 'the *oikos* was the private social unit of the family and therefore the first site of the education of the child' (Robertson 2018:25). The traditional Nigerian *oikos* is not unlike the Graeco-Roman *oikos* as it included the extended family and the head of the family is the oldest male, the paterfamilias. However, unlike the Graeco-Roman setting where the children are usually under the guidance of the *paidagogos*, who apart from the father, had the power to discipline the child, in Nigeria, other people can join in disciplining a child. Consequently, 'grandparents and other elders in the village have the right to spank any child in the village for bad behaviour' (Okafor 2003:13) and within the *oikos* 'control and discipline of male children would normally be the responsibility of the father, grandfathers and other men in the family' (Okafor 2003:13). Thus, the child in the traditional Nigerian setting is a 'victim' of harsh discipline from many quarters.

Studies have confirmed the prevalence of harsh discipline of children in Nigeria. It has been most parents' disciplinary technique (Alemika & Chukwuma 2011; Nuhu & Nuhu 2010; Ofoha & Ogidan 2020:90). UNICEF (2010) holds that traditionally beating of children is a widely sanctioned form of discipline in Nigeria and through beating, parents believe they are instilling discipline in their children. Aihie (2009) identifies six forms of abuse, five of which is relevant to this article. They are:

- Physical abuse
This is the commonest form of abuse (Obi & Ozumba 2007). It includes 'beating, kicking, knocking, punching, choking and confinement' (Aihie 2009:7).
- Neglect
This is the failure to provide for dependants including denials of food, clothing, medical care and protection among others.
- Economic abuse
This manifests in withholding money for essential things and manipulation as well as exploitation such as controlling the choice of occupation.
- Spiritual abuse
This involves forcing family religion on the child and using religion to manipulate or control the child.
- Emotional abuse
This is the destruction of the child's self-worth. These include name-calling, criticism, social isolation, intimidation, physical and verbal terrorism and exposure to violence (Obi & Ozumba 2007).

On these, Okafor (2003) states that 'other forms of punishment used include spanking, denial of playtime or as stated by some men and women, denial of food until the child atones for the bad behaviour' (p. 14). Emotional abuse involves violence. Children are constantly humiliated, shamed, and rejected till they see themselves as worthless. This may lead to depression, lowered self-esteem and dysfunctional relationships (Olusegun & Idowu 2016:6).

Fathers and children in the 1st century Ephesus and Nigeria: A comparative analysis

There are many similarities between the Nigeria and the 1st-century Graeco-Roman society. Child exposure exists in both societies. Although before the 21st century, child exposure was very minimal in Nigeria but recently, cases of child exposure are alarming and fast becoming a social vice (Onyido & Akpan 2018:15). The causes of child exposure are also similar in both societies as economic needs, evil omens and illegitimacy are common concerns. Unlike the Graeco-Roman society where there was no law against child exposure, Nigeria has some laws such as *Child Rights Acts* (2003)¹ in place, but its implementation is weak. Expressing disgust at the current rate of child exposure, Abidogun and Adeyemi (2020:1) say 'it has become a daily occurrence', thus making the Graeco-Roman and the Nigerian situation similar.

Selling of children is another thriving illegal business in Nigeria as people 'buy or abduct infants from their needy biological parents and sell them to eager adoptive families' (Ojedokun & Atoi 2016:49). From this simple, trade has emerged what is called 'baby factories', which are homes 'operating unregistered orphanages, illegal maternity homes, clinics, motherless babies' homes and fake childcare homes with the purpose of manipulating the adoption process to make monetary gains' (Ojedokun & Atoi 2016:47).

In the area of child discipline, it can be said that the Nigerian situation is worse than the Graeco-Roman as the Graeco-Roman child can only be disciplined by the father and the *paidagogos*, the Nigerian child is more vulnerable as he or she can be disciplined by the many elders in the home as well as in the society.

Conclusively, the similarity in the Graeco-Roman fathers' relationship to their children and that of the Nigerian fathers' makes the message of Ephesians 6:4 apt to the Nigerian situation.

1. Although the Child Right Act (2003) is in place in Nigeria, unlike South Africa where the laws are effectively implemented, it is very lax in Nigeria. Gbobo and Igwe (2021:97) say that "child related extant laws are not effective in protecting or promoting the rights of children because of the marked increase in the incidences of child rights abuses in Nigeria". Comparing the effectiveness of the CRA in Nigeria and South Africa, Gbobo and Igwe (2021) conclude that "Nigeria has a lot to learn from the child right law and practice in South Africa and also adopt their comprehensive and robust child related laws" (p. 112).

Ephesians 6:4: A socio-rhetorical reading

Although Ephesians 6:4 is the focal passage, the wider context is the whole of Ephesians. The writer has structured Ephesians as follows:

Opening Address 1:1–2

Thanksgiving 1:3–23

The Body 2:1–6:20

The body of the epistle is divisible into two parts: the indicative and the paraenetic sections. In the indicative section (2:1–3:21), the writer espouses how God turned sinners into saints through faith and he followed this by extending the grace to the Gentiles, consequently removing the barrier that divided the Jews and Gentiles, making them fellow citizens in God's household (Brown & Soards 2016:226).

In the paraenetic section (4:1–6:20), where Ephesians 6:4 belongs, the writer explains the implications of God's plan: the directive to live a life worthy of God's calling. Consequently, the new humanity cannot continue to live according to the old pattern (Brown & Soards 2016:227). The section can be subdivided into the life expected within the Christian community and within the household. Ephesians 5:21/22–6:9 describes the life within the household and Ephesians 6:4 is its second sub-section.

Ephesians 5:21–6:9 belongs to the household genre (cf. Col 3:18–24 and Pt 1 2:13–3:7). Tönsing (2020:18) holds that the Ephesians' household code is dependent on the Colossians' code, thus seeing the household code in Ephesians as a later revision of Colossians 3:18–24 (Chege 2018:45). However, if the two epistles and Philemon 'were authored by Paul at the same time and delivered through the same person, Tychichus' (Chege 2018:45; cf. Eph 6:21–22; Col 4:7–9)² that presupposition would be unlikely.

Ephesians 6:1–4 is the fourth of Ephesians' five hortatory passages and is also the second component of the *haustafel*. It comprises two exhortations: one to children (6:1–3) and the other to the fathers (6:4):

Each exhortation uses the household code's formal elements: (1) the person addressed according to role (6:1a, 4a); (2) the command (two exhortations each, with those addressed to parents using contrasting exhortations (6:1,2,4); and (3) the motive or rationale for the command (two rationale, but only for the children; 6:1b, 2b-3) (Larkin 2009:144).

The social context of this passage is the Graeco-Roman household of Paul's time. In its basic form, the Graeco-Roman household comprised the husband (or male head) his wife, their children and slaves (DeSilva 2007:67). The household

2. For this wider context, the author paraphrased Adewale, O.A., 2022, 'Domestic workers in Nigerian Christian families: A socio-rhetorical reading of Ephesians 6:5–9', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a7635. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7635>

includes the extended family, clients and guests (Colijn 2004:39). Following the traditional household codes, 'Paul addresses the Ephesian church members according to their household role and status [...] and defines appropriate behaviour' (Chege 2018:49). Given the social context of Ephesus, the membership of the Ephesian church would be drawn from the Greco-Roman populace dominating the area. Thus, Paul's choice of the household code format to address the Ephesian Christians was aimed at contextualising the exhortations to codes the recipients were already used to in their households. The 'household code format indicates that the households he is addressing is structured along the Graeco-Roman pattern' (Chege 2018:53). In analysing Ephesians 6:4, the author would adopt the *haustafel* format that can be sub-divided as such:

- a. The person addressed 6:4a
- b. The Command 6:4b

Unlike other exhortations, 6:4 lacks the motive or rationale for the command.

The Person Addressed (6:4a)

This phrase opens with the conjunction *καὶ* in the first position, which signifies an emphasis. Although scholars hold that conjunctions are used to link groups with mutual obligations in the household codes, thus treating it as a continuative (Larkin 2009:153), for Lincoln (1999), the use of *καὶ* serves also as a link. Apart from serving as a link, it emphatically introduced 'the fathers'. Thielman (2010) also says that 'the *καὶ* with which the sentence begins stresses the mutuality of the relationship between children and parents (fathers)' (p. 401).

The vocative noun here is *οἱ πατέρες* and it shows here the group of people being addressed. Ordinarily, *οἱ πατέρες* would be translated as [fathers]. However, some scholars hold that the word refers to parents (Bruce 1984:398; Danker & Bauer 2020:786; Larkin 2009:147) and thus translated it as [parents]. This position, however, is not suitable to the text because in verse 1, the children are called to obey the parents, using the Greek *γονεῖς*. *Πατέρες* in verse 4 should then be seen as a deliberate shift in focus to address fathers. Merkle (2016) agrees that 'singling out fathers as opposed to addressing both parents is a deliberate move by Paul' (np). Since in Graeco-Roman cultures, fathers were typically responsible for the education and discipline of children, it can be concluded that the original recipients would have held that the word refers to fathers. Lincoln (1999) also says:

... in the ancient world in both Greco-Roman and Jewish writings it is fathers in particular who are responsible for the education of the children, make it far more likely that Ephesians is in conformity with this way of thinking and is addressing male heads of households in their role as fathers (p. 406).

Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1996) say 'the fathers are specified as being the fountains of domestic authority. Fathers are more prone to passion in relation to their children

than mothers' (np). It can be concluded that *πατέρες* here refers to fathers and not to parents.

The Command (6:4b)

The address is followed by *μὴ παροργίζετε*, a prohibition in the present imperative. This construction is used to 'prohibit the continuance of an act which is in progress' (Summers 1950:113). Although most English versions translate the phrase as [do not provoke] but going by its function, it should be translated as [stop provoking]. Wallace (1996:724) admits that the present imperative plus *μὴ* has the force of cessation of activity in progress, though he concludes that the prohibition is a general precept that does not focus on the cessation of an activity in progress. Another argument in line with this is that the *sitz im leben* of Ephesians and the passage does not support the simple prohibitive use. Considering the literature on children discipline in the Graeco-Roman society, the fathers in the church would have been using harsh discipline on their children, therefore using the prohibitive imperative is appropriate. More so, the use of the prohibitive imperative does not depend on response to a particular problem. Corroborating this position, Schnackenburg (1991) says:

According to Philo upbringing is the responsibility of both father and mother, but the father is especially responsible for discipline: to scold the child, rebuke him, and, should he not obey cautionary words, to beat him. The exhortation not to 'rouse' the children ... is directed against such severity ... (p. 262)

From the given quotation, as it is the fathers who do the discipline, then directing the command to that fathers is contextually fitting and translating *μὴ παροργίζετε* as [stop provoking] cannot be out of place.

Παροργίζετε derives from the combination of preposition *παρὰ* and *οργίζω*, literally meaning [to provoke to anger, or violent and/or bitter anger]. This basic meaning is seen across Greek lexicons (cf. Balz & Schneider 1994:43; Danker & Bauer 2020:780; Louw & Nida 1989:761). However, considering the context within which it is used, which is the realm of discipline, it cautions against exasperating children in the name of discipline.

Commenting on the father's actions that can exasperate the children, Eadie (1998:444) says:

The paternal reign is not to be one of terror and stern authority, but of love. The rod may be employed, but in reason and moderation and never from momentary impulse and anger. Children are not to be moved to wrath by harsh and unreasonable treatment, or by undue partiality and favouritism.

Other things to avoid include 'unreasonably harsh demands, abuse of authority, arbitrariness, unfairness, constant nagging and condemnation, subjecting a child to humiliation, and all forms of gross insensitivity to a child's needs and sensibilities' Lincoln 1999:406). Others include a lack of 'freedom of expression and personal growth, lack of encouragement and affirmation, public embarrassment,

verbal or physical abuse and overprotective hovering that stifles growth' (Swindoll 2015:292). In summary, Paul is demanding that children must not be seen as properties 'over whom the father has legal rights. They are owed dignity as human beings' (Lincoln 1999:406).

At this point, the contrasting exhortation is introduced with *ἀλλὰ* and is used to 'introduce a statement about a procedure that contrasts with what precedes' (Danker & Bauer 2020:45). Rather than exasperate a child, the father is called to *ἐκτρέφετε* them. One needs to observe that Paul created an emphasis here. This is because *ἐκτρέφετε αὐτὰ ἐν παιδείᾳ* would literally read as [bring up your child in the upbringing] (Lincoln 1999:407, italics mine).

The phrase *ἐν παιδείᾳ καὶ νοουθεσίᾳ* would be considered together because both *παιδεία καὶ νοουθεσία* are governed by the preposition *ἐν*. The use of the two nouns here has led to several conjectures. For example, Best opines that *παιδεία καὶ νοουθεσία* are two different but coordinate aspects of domestic training (1998:569), and Lane sees it as one dealing with correction through actions, while the other deals with corrections through words (Lane 1979:950). However, it is better to see the *καὶ* connecting *παιδεία* and *νοουθεσία* as being explanatory rather than being continuative. This way, *νοουθεσία* would be explaining *παιδεία* (Larkin 2009:148; Lincoln 1999:407), and it can be concluded that these two words 'were used of the training of children, either through instruction or frequently through correction or punishment' (Lincoln 1999:407).

The message of Ephesians 6:4

This verse has two types of messages to fathers, the positive and the negative. As Paul seems to place emphasis on the negative, it would be a good place to start.

Avoid exasperating the children

Paul unequivocally asked fathers to avoid anything that could provoke the children to anger. There are many acts by fathers that lead children to anger, and these include the following:

- Fathers should not be authoritarian: Alika et al. (2016) says an authoritarian father is 'characterised by high expectation of conformity and compliance to (his) rules and directions but do not explain the rules at all' (p. 103). It has always been common for fathers to take decisions on what would affect the life of their children without consulting or sampling their opinion. Research has established that this attitude can lead to delinquent behaviour in children as, 'authoritarian parental style plays an influential role in developing the delinquent behaviour among adolescents that eventually results in negative outcomes' (Sarwar 2016:227), and in most cases, the negative behaviour is the expression of the children's anger. Fathers should allow children to use their imagination and intelligence, thereby allowing them to build self-confidence.

- Fathers should avoid choosing vocation for children: this is common among the educated and the wealthy. They impose courses their children are to read in the university and ultimately their vocation. Despite the adverse impact on children, it is rampant among children.

Forcing a career on children, experts contend, is one of the surest ways of stifling creativity in them, a development that could also lead to the latter living a miserable and unfulfilled life. It is in this direction that, for the umpteenth time, parents have been cautioned against forcing careers on their children and wards in order not to inhibit their innate abilities (Adekunle 2016:np).

- Fathers should avoid disallowing their children from expressing themselves: let them express their views over issues, especially that which concerns them. Disallowing children from expressing themselves have always been hinged on adult's perception that children are inexperienced and too young to talk amid adults. This is a form of negative expression. However, it is parents' positive expression towards children that are associated with better social development (Green & Baker 2011:324). Unfortunately, as such children withdraw, their 'social interactions and relationships with peers are inevitable impaired' (Rubin, Coplan & Bowker 2009:146).
- Fathers should avoid being distant fathers. Good fathers should spend time with their children. In fact, I believe that fathers should be gentle, caring and tender to the children as their mother is. Rather than hide under the excuse of being the breadwinner, fathers should learn how to spend quality time with their children and get to know their children. They should prove to be fathers who are devoted to and spend time with their children.

The next thing is to focus on the positive command. In line with the given argument that the use of *νοουθεσία* and *παιδεία* would denote discipline and education, the following can be deduced:

Fathers should discipline their children

Paul was not in any way advocating for a situation where children would not be disciplined. He is only advocating for a just and sensible discipline. He just advised that children should not be disciplined to the point of anger or frustration. The message here is that children should be disciplined in a way that is commensurate to what they had done wrong.

Fathers should educate their children

Education in Pauline times was largely Graeco-Roman and when writing to the Ephesians, he would have had this in mind. This involved the primary (ages 7–11), the secondary (ages 12–15) and the advanced study that terminates at age 20 (Jackson 1969:4). After this, education in influential cities such as Athens and Alexandria can be undertaken. Being highly educated in Graeco-Roman style, as evident in his rhetorical skills, it would not be out of place to assume that Paul advocated for children's education.

Application to the Nigerian situation

In applying the message of this passage to the Nigerian situation, firstly the issue to address would be the prevalence of punitive correction meted out to children. Thus, fathers should strive to end the punitive correction meted out to their children and begin to make correction corrective. Fathers should realise that 'children raised with authoritative discipline tend to be happy and successful. They are also more likely to become responsible adults' (Lawal & Usman 2020:4), while 'children of authoritarian parents are prone to having low self-esteem, being fearful or shy [...] having difficulty in social situations, and possibly misbehaving when outside parental care' (Lawal & Usman 2020:5).

Secondly, fathers need to give their children Western education because in these times, the educated have an edge over others. This is more important in these days of globalisation, and because education and globalisation 'share a symbiotic relationship as each one depends on the other for sustenance, maintenance and constant development' (Onyekwere, Okoringa & Dike 2017:142) to give any child an edge in the contemporary world, the child should be educated.

Thirdly, apart from Western education, it is important for fathers to give their children cultural education. This is corroborated by Thielman (2010) who opines that the term *παιδεία* could refer to [mental training in the values of a particular culture] (p. 402). Most parents today avoid cultural training for their children because of the prevalent belief that African culture is backward and demonic. In homes and schools, children are being trained to adopt the Western culture. Unfortunately, these children are not properly immersed in the Western culture and become strangers to their culture, which usually leads to identity crises (Isife 2021:65). There is a need to balance cultural and Western education in the children to ground them in both cultures.

Finally, fathers should not lose sight of Christian education. In the face of the threatening modernisation that tends to drive Christian virtues into the oblivion, Christian fathers owe their children sound Christian education from cradle to adulthood. Good Christian foundation is enough to give fortitude when the storms of life arise.

Conclusion

Ephesians 6:4 makes it obvious that Paul understood that it is necessary to discipline children. He is also aware of the gross child abuse that exists in the 1st-century Graeco-Roman world in the name of discipline, hence his call for a cessation of such exasperating forms of discipline. Consequently, in addressing the situation, Paul asked for a balanced discipline with the training of children. As the conditions of children are not dissimilar to that of Pauline audience, the message of Paul to the Ephesians becomes applicable to the Nigerians.

Thus, Christian fathers in Nigeria need to begin a re-definition of the father figure by following Pauline exhortation that

fathers need not be harsh to maintain discipline in the house. There is a need to use other means of constructive discipline rather than the traditional brutal and harsh discipline. Fathers need to correct their children out of love and remember to practice the saying that if we use the right hand to rebuke a child, we also use the left to draw the child closer. This would help to rear children who are devoid of resentment and full of love.

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