journal of biblical perspectives in leadership

SAMSON'S BLINDNESS AND ETHICAL SIGHT

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Until recently, ethics research, and Scripture's contribution to it has been sparse. It is, therefore, critical to contribute serious exegetical investigation to the conversation. Ethical blind spots impact every individual. They must not be ignored or placated. Inner texture analysis of Judges 13-16 exposes ethical blind spots in Israel's last judge, Samson. The repetition of words and thematic progressions reveal Samson's ethical shortcomings, and his ultimate redemption, as an example for contemporary leaders. Additionally, Samson's ethical code, tandem with a driving metaphor, prescribes contemporary solutions to ethical waywardness. Ethical blind spots distort the LORD's divine calling. Wrong decisions carried out with discretion seem hidden and harmless. Samson's narrative teaches that they mutilate one's character and calling. Christian leaders must address ethical blind spots through the evaluation of past experience, alignment between the "want" and "should" self, and rootedness in their relationship with the LORD and with others.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Western world has adopted a post-truth approach which bludgeons morality and fissures ethical development. By dichotomizing truth and values, leaders offer "valueless facts" to their followers (Hathaway, 2018). Society prides itself on calling right wrong and wrong right (Isa 5:20). The biblical refrain that marked the Israelites during the period of the judges—"everyone did what was right in their own eyes"—poignantly describes contemporary approaches to ethics. Such thinking has permeated present-day institutions. One seminary, which will remain unnamed, has adopted a view of the cross as an image of divine erotica. This depraved theological conclusion, which heretically misinterprets the central salvific act in human history, conveys a severe blind spot. Ethical, theological, and personal blind spots, however, are often difficult to self-detect.

A blind spot, scientifically speaking, occurs "when something blocks light from reaching the photoreceptor" (Gregory & Cavanagh, 2011, p. 9618). When driving a vehicle, a blind spot emerges from improperly angling one's mirrors. In both

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representations, blind spots are intrinsically related to light and sight. Ethical blind spots are no different. When individuals act in secrecy and isolation, they tend to make poorer decisions, creating blind spots. Similarly, when individuals set their gaze on achievement and financial success, they tend to neglect morals in their chase for accomplishment. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) define this gap as the space between intended behavior and actual behavior.

The aforementioned gap is particularly evident in Israel's last judge, Samson (Judg 13-16). Familiarity with Samson's narrative often robs its profound contribution. Utilizing Robbins' (1996) inner texture analysis, this paper will explore Samson's behavior. In so doing, the repetition of words and thematic progressions will be uncovered. Subsequently, this paper will service Samson's ethical shortcomings, and his ultimate redemption, as an example for contemporary leaders. The inner textual analysis will reveal helpful boundaries for ethical living in the present age.

II. INNER TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF JUDGES 13-16

Textual familiarity blinds exegetes from seriously considering the textual repetition and narrative progression biblical authors serviced to convey meaning. Repetitive phrases, sequential progressions, and narrational structures invite readers to investigate individual words, narrative sections, and their engagement with the scriptural part and the broader whole. In Samson's narrative, these literary devices play a significant role in appropriate narrative interpretation.

Narrative Background

As the twelfth Israelite judge, Samson served as the LORD's final judicial attempt to transform a morally opaque people who "did what was evil in the sight of the LORD" (Judg 13:1). While the divine prophecy, "he shall *begin* to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines" (Judg 13:5, italics added), was fulfilled in Samson's death, he recapitulated the broader judicial pattern, leaving the Israelites in a state of moral and spiritual dysfunction (Mbuvi, 2012). Samson's narrative literarily bridged the judicial cycle found in chapters 1-12 to the moral wanderings of the concluding chapters by utilizing language and themes from both (Mbuvi, 2012).

The initial angelic promise, coupled with the narrator's description of Samson's divinely blessed upbringing (Judg 13:24), offered great hope for the Israelites. Nonetheless, his judicial approach seemed to depreciate from the exemplary faith of previous judges (Butler, 2009). Although the LORD's Spirit imbued Samson for divine exploits, he succumbed to temptation and acquiesced to the moral depravity of his time where "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 17:6; Hildebrand, 1988). Even after his involvement with the Philistine woman from Timnah (Judg 14:1-7), the prostitute at Gaza (Judg 16:1-3), and Delilah in the Valley of Sorek (Judg 16:4-22), Samson's weakness offered a space for the fulfillment of God's purpose and the redemption of his presumably failed judicial reign (Todd, 2016).

The common refrain, "the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the LORD," precipitated another forty-year cycle of foreign oppression by the Philistines (Judg 13:1). In earlier judge-deliverer narratives, the Israelites cried out to Yahweh for deliverance.

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Israel's deafening silence in the midst of foreign oppression highlights their moral deterioration (Boda, 2012). Samson's twenty-year judicial reign, which was intended to *begin* salvation from the Philistines, is geographically bookended by Zorah and Eshtaol (13:25—16:31). These geographical markers not only offer locative placement but foreshadow the coming regional disaster (Judg 17-18; Boda, 2012). Within this geographical *inclusio*, Hildebrand (1988) proposed three main narrative sections: (1) the birth narrative (Judg 13), (2) the narrative cycle initiated by the Philistine woman of Timnah (Judg 14-15), and (3) the narrative cycle initiated by Samson's encounter with the Gazite prostitute and Delilah (Judg 16). The final two narrative cycles are primarily formed by relational betrayals that reverse Samson's seeming defeat into the death of his Philistine enemies (Pressler, 2000). These two cycles also end with a concluding statement regarding Samson's twenty-year reign (Hildebrand, 1988).

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Table 1
Narrative Repetition and Progression (Judg 13-16)

Ch.13								
v. 1		Sight		Philistines				
v. 2								Zorah
v. 5				Philistines				
v. 6							Tell; told	
v. 10							Told	
v. 18		Seeing						
v. 19		Watching						
v. 20		Watching						
v. 24	Samson							
v. 25					Spirit of the LORD	Began to stir him		Zorah and Eshtaol
Ch. 14								
v. 1	Samson	Saw	Woman from Timnah	Philistines (daughters)				
v. 2		Saw		Philistines (daughters)			Told	
v. 3	Samson	Eyes		Philistines (uncircumcised)				
v. 4				Philistines				
v. 4				Philistines				
v. 5	Samson							
v. 6					Spirit of the LORD	Rushed upon him	Tell	
v. 7	Samson's	Eyes						
v. 8		See (carcass)						
v. 9							Tell	
v. 10	Samson							
v. 11		Saw						
v. 12	Samson						Tell	
v. 13							Tell	

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v. 15	Samson's (wife)						Entice	Tell
v. 16	Samson's (wife)							Told; told; tell
v. 17								Told; told
v. 19					Spirit of the LORD	Rushed upon him		Told
v. 20	Samson's (wife)							
Ch. 15								
v. 1	Samson							
v. 3	Samson			Philistines				
v. 4	Samson							
v. 5				Philistines				
v. 6	Samson			Philistines				
v. 6				Philistines				
v. 7	Samson							
v. 9				Philistines				
v. 10	Samson							
v. 11	Samson			Philistines				
v. 12	Samson							
v. 14				Philistines	Spirit of the LORD	Rushed upon him		
v. 16	Samson							
v. 20				Philistines				Twenty years
Ch. 16								
v. 1	Samson	Saw	Prostitute (Gaza)					
v. 2	Samson							
v. 3	Samson							
v. 4			Delilah					

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v. 5		See	Philistines (lords)			Seduce			
v. 6	Samson						Tell		
v. 7	Samson								
v. 8			Philistines (lords)						
v. 9	Samson		Philistines						
v. 10	Samson						Told; tell		
v. 12	Samson		Philistines						
v. 13	Samson						Told; tell		
v. 14	Samson		Philistines						
v. 15							Told	Heart	
v. 17							Told	Heart	
v. 18	Samson	Saw	Philistines (lords); Philistines (lords)				Told; told		
v. 20			Philistines	LORD	Had left him			Heart; heart	
v. 21		Eyes (gouged)	Philistines						
v. 23	Samson		Philistine (lords)						
v. 24		Saw							
v. 25	Samson								
v. 25	Samson							Hearts	
v. 26	Samson								
v. 27	Samson		Philistines (lords)						
v. 28	Samson	Eyes	Philistines	LORD; LORD					
v. 29	Samson								
v. 30	Samson		Philistines						
v. 31									Twenty years	Zorah and Eshtaol

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Sight: Textual Repetition, Pattern, and Progression

As evidenced in Table 1, sight language is pervasive in Samson's narrative and initiates each primary cycles—(1) the Lord *saw* the Israelites' evil and miraculously provided a judge through a previously barren woman (Judg 13:1). (2) Through divine purpose, Samson *saw* a Philistine woman in Timnah and demanded expedient parental action (Judg 14:1). (3) Samson *saw* a Gazite prostitute (Judg 16:1). In the first cycle, the divine messenger appeared to Monoah's wife twice. The first visitation was exclusive to Monoah's wife. In the second visitation, Monoah prayed to *see* the divine visitor. After the visitor appeared again to Monoah's wife, she invited Monoah to meet the LORD's angel. Then, Monoah *saw* (Mduvi, 2012).

In the two subsequent narrative cycles, the text follows Samson's moral digression. With the woman in Timnah, the LORD's desire, unbeknownst to Samson's parents, coalesced with Samson's desire (Mbuvi, 2012). As Samson eyed the woman from Timnah, her people eyed Samson (Judg 14:11). His attempt at unification through a riddle brought the divine purpose of Philistine destruction.

With the Gazite prostitute, the text does not indicate divine purpose. Samson's sexual rendezvous demonstrated his foolish impulsivity based on lustful sight (Butler, 2009; Judg 16:1). His sexual tryst with the Gazite prostitute took him into fortified Philistine territory and exposed his sexual vulnerability to the Philistines (Boda, 2012). Samson's decline is apparent: with the woman of Timnah, his wife, he was "on traditional Israelite land"; contrastingly, with the Gazite prostitute, he was deep into Philistine territory (Boda, 2012, p. 1227).

The Delilah episode revealed Samson's degraded moral state. His sexual appetite and distorted view of love drove him further into compromise. Different from the previous encounters driven by sight, Block (1999) argued, "now womanizing ha[d] become a fundamental aspect of his character" (p. 453). For this reason, the text records Samson's "love" for the first named woman in the narrative, Delilah (Block, 1999). In this episode, the text does not record Samson seeing. The Philistine lords task Delilah to "*see* where his great strength lies" (Judg 16:5, italics added). Once she *saw* his secret, she reported her findings to the Philistine lords (Judg 16:18). The Philistines seized Samson and gouged out his eyes (Judg 16:21). As the Philistine crowds *saw* Samson emasculated and turned into a performer, Samson, without eyes, truly *saw* (Judg 16:28; Kim, 2014).

Telling: Textual Repetition, Pattern, and Progression

A flurry of activity occurs with the term, "tell/told (נגד)," in the accounts of Samson's wife from Timnah (Judg 14-15) and Delilah (Judg 16). As shown in Table 1, the solicitation of information was precipitated by Philistine coercion in both accounts. Boda (2012) astutely noted, "while the men of Timnah used negative coercion, threatening to burn the woman and her family with fire (14:15), the rulers of the Philistines use positive coercion, offering a reward of 1,100 silver pieces from each of them—thus, 5,500 silver pieces in total" (p. 1229). Although the English text differentiates between the term used for coercion in the two accounts, entice (Judg 14:15) and seduce (Judges 16:5), the Hebrew term is the same (פתה).

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> Todd (2016) pointed out numerous parallels drawn between these two accounts:
>
> Both women are coerced by the Philistines to extract a secret from Samson. Both women question Samson's love, and pester him until he gives in to their demands. In both instances, the answer leads to Samson's capture by the Philistines. Samson prays, and Yahweh answers ("Samson the Judge").

While these parallels are inescapable, it is important to note the second accounts' linguistic and thematic strengthening of the elements introduced in the Timnah account. These striking similarities should not distract from the intensification and consummation of the final account. Take, for example, Samson's answering of the riddle in the first account. It bore consequences; however, they were aligned with the divine purpose of the relationship—the destruction of the Philistines. In the second account, Samson revealed the secret of his strength, relinquishing his mother's Nazarite consecration for his lover's betrayal (Kim, 2014). The text intensifies the revelation of this secret as a divulgence of "all his heart" (Judg 16:18). The depths of this revelation exposed him entirely. As Samson's heart was wholly broken, the hearts of the Philistines were merry (Judg 16:25). His brokenness and blindness led him to prayerful petition (Judg 16:28), while the Philistines' pagan celebration led them to death (Judg 16:30).

Spirit of the Lord: Textual Repetition, Pattern, and Progression

From the beginning of Samson's narrative, his judicial purpose could only be achieved through divine intervention. Even his birth required a divine messenger to a barren wife (Judg 13:2-7). The LORD's Spirit stirred Samson between the aforementioned geographical markers, Zorah and Eshtaol (Judg 13:24), preparing him for the initial stages of his divinely ordained mission. The narrative plot thickened when adversity confronted Samson in the form of a lion. The Spirit of the LORD rushed upon him so that he could successfully overtake the lion. Yet, after this momentous, divinely inspired victory, he defiled himself by disposing of the lion's carcass. After some time, he revisited the carcass to defile himself yet again, scraping honey out of the lion's corpse as he continued to Timnah (Block, 1999). He "callously implicate[d] his parents" by offering them honey from the lion's carcass, desecrating the very ones who consecrated him (Block, 1999, p. 429-430; Nu 6:6). Even after desecrating the Nazarite vow, the LORD's Spirit rushed upon him again making him a weapon of war as he selfishly responded to Philistine deception (Chisolm, 2005, p. 6). When the LORD's Spirit rushed upon Samson to bring further destruction to the Philistines for their provocations against him and the Judahites, Samson reached for a fresh jawbone of a donkey (Judg 15:15). A fresh jawbone "was still considered part of a corpse," thus violating the Nazarite vow again (Block, 1999, p. 445). After two blatant violations of the Nazarite vow, the LORD's continued work through Samson demonstrated the LORD's grace and mercy toward the people of Israel (Boda, 2012).

When Samson was driven into Gaza by his sensual desires, there is no textual connection to the LORD as there was in Timnah when the LORD's Spirit rushed upon Samson to accomplish a divinely ordained directive. When Samson pursued Delilah, there is no textual connection to the LORD's purpose or direction. When Samson

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engaged three times in a sensual love game with Delilah, the LORD is not explicitly mentioned in the text. The retention of Samson's strength in each of these instances pointed to an implicit reminder of the LORD's blessing upon Samson. Yet, the fourth time, when Samson revealed his hair as the marker of Nazirite consecration, Delilah acted. Samson's arrogant assumption of the LORD's blessing of strength led to his maiming and enslavement. To assume his strength would remain after his Nazirite vow was observably broken for the third time revealed a hubris that repeatedly placed him in compromising situations (Block, 1999).

Even though the LORD's blessing of strength left him, and his eyes were gouged out, his hair began to grow again (Judg 16:22). In Samson's most physically, spiritually, and emotionally compromised state, the LORD silently answered him one final time. The text does not mention the LORD's Spirit rushing upon him as before. It does, however, record the LORD's silent answer through Samson's success in killing more Philistines in his death than the sum-total of his life (Judg 16:30).

III. ETHICAL BLINDSPOTS AND JUDGES 13-16

Ethical codes, value propositions, and statements of expected behavior are organizationally normative. Codified ethics have been commercialized for leaders to shape and articulate organizational values that create ethical systems and environments (O'Neill, 1990). They primarily exist to create operating guidelines and boundaries so that individuals adhere to organizational values (Gray, 1996). The codification of ethics is not a recent phenomenon. Thomas Percival was somewhat of a forerunner in the Enlightenment era publishing a code of ethics in 1803 for medical practitioners (Berlant, 1978). In his publication, he connected successful medical practice with the formation that occurs in public worship (Hathaway, 2018). Today's educational schemas detach intellectual formation from ethical formation resulting in fragmented individuals with numerous blind spots (Glanzer, Alleman, & Ream, 2017). Take, for example, the globalization of our world. While its intention to bring interconnectedness has been successful, it has resulted in moral, geographical, and chronological fragmentation, leaving our world in a post-moral state (Rist, 2012, p. 1; Harmon, 2016). Using Samson's ethical code, tandem with a driving metaphor, this section will service the inner texture analysis above to prescribe contemporary solutions to ethical blind spots.

Evaluated experience

When driving, the rear-view mirror must be angled directly to the rear window to avoid a blind spot. If a driver cannot view that which is behind, they cannot correctly anticipate what is ahead. Metaphorically speaking, the rear-view mirror provides leaders access to assess past decisions. In Samson's narrative, the text does not report personal reflection. Samson simply acted. Unfortunately, many of his actions were based on sheer visual desire. The cyclical nature of his mistakes demonstrated his inability to understand past experiences and their bearing upon the present moment.

Every decision offers an option between what one wants to do and what one should do. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) refer to this tension as the "want" and

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"should" self. Unfortunately, Bazerman and Tenbrunsel do not investigate the influence of evaluated experience and its ability to transform one's wants. If every decision is a violent battle between one's desires and one's ethical obligation, ethical outcomes will be less than ideal. Samson's "want" blinded him from his pattern of poor choices and their outcomes. It was not until Samson was utterly tormented that he realized he could take a different path; namely, asking for the LORD's help (Judg 16:28). Had Samson considered his vow and communicated with the LORD, his desires could have been transformed and his judicial reign could have been substantially different. Evaluating poor ethical outcomes creates a helpful aversion to the shame associated with poor decision making.

Reflection on one's ethical code re-affirms one's commitment to it. Samson was consecrated as a Nazirite. However, his actions progressively moved him away from his original consecration. After initially touching the lion's carcass (Judg 13:6), he returned to eat honey from it (Judg 13:9) rather than repenting. He further reneged the Nazirite vow by touching a fresh jawbone (Judg 15:15) and subsequently allowing Delilah to cut his hair (Judg 16:14). Had Samson considered his vow and repented of the actions running counter to it, he may have avoided such a grim death. Biblical, ethical living requires repentance (Fedler, 2006). Considering one's past actions, and course correcting, re-aligns one's ethical map.

Momentary decisions

To avoid blind spots, drivers must also appropriately angle their side mirrors. This allows them to view nearby objects. In the driving metaphor, side mirrors correspond to a leader's ability to make the right decision at the moment of decision. Badaracco (1997) contended that momentary decisions are primarily driven by intuition, passion, and commitment. Samson's narrative verifies intuition and passion's role in the decision-making process. Ironically, Samson's visual desire blinded him from ethically appropriate responses. He was only able to see when his eyes were gouged out (Judg 16:21, 28-30).

Bazerman and Tenbrunsel (2011) do not believe ethical decisions are tethered to an individual's wants. Perhaps that is why Samson's Nazirite vow did not prevent him from cyclical unethical behavior. The assumption, however, that ethicality is far removed from one's desire runs counter to the biblical map. Right decisions in the moment demand more than codified ethics. Right decisions require inward transformation where one's "wants" and "shoulds" converge. When someone's desires are transformed, their actions change. Inner transformation is the work of God. It can only be accomplished through divine initiative and obedient human response.

In a global survey, followers chronicled their desire for alignment between their leader's "want" and "should" self. Integrity was, therefore, one of twenty-one universally accepted virtues (Ciulla, 2014). Ethically successful leaders understand their followers are watching (Cuilla, 2014). They consider it a privilege to lead by example in private and public (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). When Samson ate from the lion's carcass, the text indicates its private nature. He took what he consumed in private and shared the ceremonially polluted honey in public, defiling his family. Furthermore, Samson's private love game with Delilah (Judg 16:5-20) caused public mutilation and humiliation (Judg

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16:21-25). Samson lived well beneath his Nazirite vow. For contemporary leaders, integrity bridges the gap between belief and behavior, reducing blind spots through careful evaluation of behavior at the moment of decision. When desire and responsibility align, right decision-making becomes much easier.

Ethical rootedness

After an appropriate decision is made, how does a leader continue to make good decisions? The driving metaphor offers additional insight: When all mirrors are appropriately angled, the driver must remain seated and place his/her foot on the gas pedal. Metaphorically speaking, once a leader considers the past and appropriately responds in the present, they must proceed to the next situation. Ethical temptation is not a one-time occurrence. Ethical dilemmas abound. Through negative example, Samson's narrative reveals the key to sustained ethicality: spiritual reciprocation. Samson did not sacrifice to the LORD. He did not worship the LORD. He did not pray to the LORD until his strength vanished (Judg 15:18), and his body was mutilated (Judg 16:28). Had Samson reciprocated the LORD's blessings with worship and gratitude, he could have centered himself, remained faithful to the Nazirite vow, and broken the cycle of unethical behavior. Spiritual reciprocation provides unification between the spiritual, intellectual, relational, and vocational self.

Additionally, ethical rootedness requires satisfaction with one's decisions. If one cannot be at peace with their decisions, they will not be postured to respond to the next situation appropriately. To ensure decisional satisfaction, Badaracco (1997) proposed the sleep test: the ethicality of the decision is contingent upon the actor's ability to sleep. For Christian leaders, ethical rootedness must be deeper than their ability to sleep. They must be able to respond to the LORD's whisper to forgive (Jer 31:33). They must forfeit their aggrandized moral superiority and humbly ask, "please strengthen me only this once" (Judg 16:28). When Christian leaders remain humble, they do not overestimate their ability to make the right decision. They avoid the blind spot of hubris by depending upon the LORD's strength and transforming power.

Finally, ethical rootedness requires community. Samson's narrative demonstrates the danger of isolation. At first, Samson was connected to his family; however, after the Philistines torched his wife (Judg 15:6), he moved further away from his homeland and tested the boundaries of desire. Ultimately, he exchanged his divine strength for visual desire. Contemporary leaders are increasingly tempted to isolate themselves in order to maintain their image and create coercive power distance (Mittal & Elias, 2016). They must resist the temptation of isolation and choose a life of accountability and community, moving from the singular to the plural.

IV. CONCLUSION

Ethical blind spots impact every individual. They should not be ignored or placated. They must be addressed through evaluated experience, alignment between the "want" and "should" self, and rootedness in relationship with the LORD and with others. Samson's narrative functions as a cautionary exhortation and a gracious reminder. Christian leaders should not ignore blind spots. Blind spots distort the LORD's

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divine calling. Even though wrong decisions carried out with discretion seem hidden and harmless, Samson's narrative teaches that they mutilate one's character and calling. Even so, Samson's story offers hope. After his largest ethical failure, his hair—the sign of his consecration to God—began to grow again (Judg 16:22). Redemption is possible even after one's greatest failure.

While the inner texture analysis conveyed the cyclical nature of Samson's behavior, more inner textual exploration should occur between Samson's judicial reign and his eleven predecessors. After comparisons are drawn between the decision-making processes of the twelve Israelite judges, one should conduct a comparative analysis between Old Testament ethical leadership and New Testament ethical leadership to uncover continuity and variance.

About the Author

Born in Lenoir, North Carolina, Benjamin received a call to ministry at the age of ten. He pursued this call fervently throughout his teenage years. This led him to Emmanuel College (GA) where he obtained his Bachelor of Arts in Christian Ministry. After this, he went to Regent University where he graduated with a Master of Divinity-Biblical Studies and married the love of his life, Tiffany Crisp. He is now pursuing his Doctor of Strategic Leadership-Ecclesial Leadership at Regent University's School of Business and Leadership. Benjamin is the lead pastor of Reflection Church in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

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