

Genesis 3:16 and the Character of God

Jane L. Crane

Loren Cunningham, cofounder of one of the world's largest missions organizations, said Scripture never contradicts God's character. God's Word is "infallible," he says, "but our interpretation is not."¹ The highly-regarded theologian I. Howard Marshall agrees with the infallibility of Scripture and also "the need for right interpretation."² Bruce Metzger, chair of the translation committee for the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, said no translation of the Scriptures is perfect, "as anyone who has tried to make one will readily agree."³ The New International Version says the work of translation is never finished. "This applies to all great literature and uniquely so to the Bible."⁴

As some highly esteemed scholars have argued, and as this article will explain, the current leading translations of Gen 3:16 do not agree with either the earliest known Scripture versions—considered the most accurate—or with the character of God. Such translations have sometimes led to the degrading and abuse of women, as well as the misrepresentation of God, and need revision.

Examined in light of translation issues, quirks of history, and gender bias, Gen 3:16 (and the other key verses in Genesis about women) present a different picture of women and men, and of a compassionate God, than is often taught today.

Pain from God or Snare from the Enemy?

Some translations say in the first part of Gen 3:16 that God will increase the woman's pain in childbirth. Such translations, however, could have been affected by the later addition of written vowels to the original, all-consonant Hebrew text.

In the early centuries after Christ, the Jews had dispersed, and different understandings arose of many Hebrew words, since their words were written all in consonants and with minimal spaces between words. To standardize the biblical text, a group of scribes called the Masoretes added interlinear vowel signs and thus fixed the meaning of words that were formerly written only with consonants.⁵ The resulting Hebrew text shaped by the Masoretes is still used today; however, it is generally recognized that it needs correction in some places.⁶

Peter Flint explains in his highly respected work on the Dead Sea Scrolls that prior to the addition of vowels, many Hebrew words could be read in more than one way, leading to different meanings. For example, *dg* (using an English example) could be *dig*, *dog*, or *dug*, depending on which vowels are used.⁷ OT scholar Walter Kaiser also points out that different vowel choices can result in different

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meanings. He credits the pioneering research of Katharine Bushnell in the early 1900s for identifying two different possibilities for Gen 3:16. Bushnell, a brilliant M.D. missionary who learned Hebrew and Greek to study the Bible in its original languages, published a now-classic work of 100 lessons on

the Scripture passages about women, including Gen 3:16.⁸

Bushnell points out that the early Hebrew in Gen 3:16a contains the two consonantal words, *HRB ARB*.⁹ She showed there were two different options for the adding of interlinear vowels. These are shown below in lower case. The resulting meanings are also shown and are quite different:¹⁰

OPTION 1: *HaRBah AaRBeh*, "I will greatly multiply"

OPTION 2: *HiRBah AoReB*, "has caused to multiply (or made great) a lying-in-wait"

Option 1 has led to the oft-used translation where God increases the woman's pain in childbirth. Option 2, however, leads to a translation where the serpent, not God, initiated the problem—and the problem is sorrow and sighing, not pain in childbirth. Bushnell and Kaiser believe that the interspersed vowels in Option 2 lead to a more accurate translation of the verse:¹¹

"A snare [from the enemy] has increased your sorrow and sighing."

They point to the following facts:

1. The Hebrew word sometimes translated "conception" or "childbearing" is two letters short for such a translation (*HRN* instead of *HRJWN*).
2. The Septuagint—considered the most important of the ancient versions of the OT—translates *HGN* as "sighing," not pain in childbirth.
3. *ARB* appears fourteen times in Joshua and Judges as "ambush" or "a lying-in-wait."
4. A snare from the enemy would refer to the serpent in the prior verses.

In addition, "sighing and sorrow" fit the context. The consequences of deception and sin will be grievous, including leaving the garden. Increasing pain in childbirth, however, does not fit the context. Childbirth has not occurred in Genesis prior to the sin of Adam and Eve to explain an "increase" in pain in childbirth.

Kaiser and Bushnell also include the character of God in their assessments. They point out that God would not declare children

a blessing in Gen 1:28 and then turn that into a curse with painful childbirth. As Kaiser says, “God is never the source of evil and pain.” Satan is. God “would rather bless women.”¹² That compassionate God provides a magnificent plan for atonement, whereby the offspring of Eve—prophesying Jesus—will crush the head of the scheming serpent.

Desiring Man or Turning toward Him?

Some current translations then say in Gen 3:16 that the woman will “desire” (*teshuqah*) the man. However, the twelve known ancient translations, as Bushnell points out, almost universally use the meaning of “turning toward” the man.¹³ These translations include the Septuagint, the most important of all the ancient versions and the one that is cited throughout the NT.¹⁴ In addition, various church Fathers used *teshuqah* with a meaning of “turning,” including Clement of Rome, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Epiphanius, and Jerome.¹⁵

The meaning “to turn” can also fit well with the other two OT uses of *teshuqah*. Genesis 4:7 could read, “sin is turning to you,” and Song of Songs 7:10, “my lover is turning to me.”¹⁶

The first known instance of the concept of “desire” for this word instead of “turning” was from an Italian Dominican monk, Pagnino, in his 1528 translation of the Hebrew Bible into Latin.¹⁷ He used the words for “lust” and “appetite,” with a sense of libido or sensual desire. Such a concept had appeared in the “Ten Curses of Eve” in the Jewish Talmud, which has roots reaching back to when Jewish thought was influenced by Greek writings in blaming woman for man’s ills, as in the Greek myth of Pandora.¹⁸ An influential biblical critic in the 1600s criticized Pagnino for “too much neglecting the ancient versions of Scripture and attaching himself to the teachings of the rabbis.”¹⁹

Nevertheless, Pagnino’s concept of “desire” has continued to be carried forward into many of today’s English translations. Various attempts at interpretations for such a meaning have been made, including physical desire and a desire for the husband’s power, both of which are speculations. Because Jesus rebuked men for lust even in their hearts, it is difficult to believe that a holy God would intentionally inflict sexual desire or lust on women, or on men.

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Biblical scholars Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart have called for “enlightened common sense” in interpreting Scripture. They say this requires the Holy Spirit’s help and that correct interpretation brings “relief to the mind, as well as a prick or prod to the heart.”²⁰ Similarly, long-time seminary professor Howard Hendricks says we need “sanctified common sense.”²¹ He points out, speaking of the Bible in general, that our English text leaves us a long way from a

complete understanding, and we have to use our minds to interpret it accurately and perceptively. Our faith, he says, is not “taking a deep breath, shutting our eyes, and believing what we know deep down inside is absolutely incredible.”²²

I would add that “sanctified common sense” is especially needed when a Scripture translation appears to violate the character of God.

God Prescribes Male Rule or Predicts It?

Next in Gen 3:16, God says the man will rule over the woman—the first statement of male dominance. Scholars have pointed out, however, that the Hebrew verb here for “rule” is in a tense indicating what *will* happen. The verb is not presented in a command form. Roger Nicole, an eminent Bible scholar, wrote that God’s words here are “a divine description of what would occur, not a mandate which obedient servants of God should attempt to carry out.”²³

Kaiser says the Hebrew grammar for Gen 3:16b will not allow the translation, “he shall rule over you.” That would make the statement mandatory with the force of a command. Rather, the verb contains a simple statement of future reality, with “not one hint of obligation or normativity.” To argue differently, he says, would be as logical as demanding that a verb in 3:18 be rendered, “It *shall produce* thorns and thistles” (using “shall” in the sense of “must”). If so, Kaiser says, then all farmers who use weed killer would be disobedient to God, that God is demanding that the ground have thorns and thistles.²⁴

Kaiser says the Hebrew reads: “You are turning away [from God!] to your husband, and [as a result] he will rule over you [take advantage of you].” The sense of Gen 3:16b, he says, is that because of sin, the woman would turn away from her sole dependence on God and turn now to the man. The results would not be pleasant, warned God.²⁵ But in mercy, God also gives a redemptive plan.

Biblical theologian Manfred Brauch explains that the statement regarding male rule over woman is not to be understood as *prescriptive* (what should be) but as *descriptive*, as revealing the human condition when separated from relationship with God. Brauch says it is the fall that precipitates the man’s rule over the woman, and this “power-over relationship” is to be understood as a distortion of God’s creative design and intention. In contrast, he says, God’s redemptive work points followers of Jesus beyond this power-over relationship and “toward the reaffirmation and re-actualization of God’s created intention.”²⁶

The God described in numerous passages of Scripture is compassionate, gracious, longsuffering, plentiful in mercy and truth,²⁷ yet also warns the woman of the consequences of her choice. It would not be consistent with God’s character, as revealed in Scripture, to curse her with pain and subjugation. This God also devises a redemptive plan through Jesus to draw men and women back to their original creation plan, where both are given dominion together over the earth, not power one over the other.

When Jesus reveals God’s character on earth, he never preaches a doctrine of male superiority or leadership over women. Rather, he contends for an attitude of servanthood and preferring one another and treats women with culture-defying respect, including

in spiritual matters. Kenneth Bailey, a biblical scholar who lived in the Middle East and wrote an extensive cultural study of Jesus, says the “radical nature of the changes in the attitudes toward women that Jesus introduced are beyond description.”²⁸ NT scholar Ben Witherington III says the actions of both Jesus and Paul (which need to be understood in light of their first-century culture and translation issues) affirmed a “transformed vision” of the patriarchy of their day.²⁹

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Some use Gen 2:18 as another verse to justify the rule of man. In it, the woman is described, in the context of her creation, with a two-word Hebrew phrase (*ezer kenegdo*) sometimes translated “helper,” a “helper suitable,” or a “help meet.” “Help meet” came from the King James Version of the Bible in the seventeenth century, when “meet” meant “fit to” or “corresponding,” morphing into the English “helpmate.” When the King James Version was written, however, Hebrew had been largely out of use for centuries, and the understanding of its vocabulary was inadequate.³⁰

Kaiser says that sometime around 1500 BC, two similar Hebrew roots merged to form *ezer*. One meant “to rescue, to save,” and the other “to be strong.” The result was “almost certainly” a wrong translation, “helper.” He explains that the ancient Hebrew of the first word of the phrase, sometimes translated “help,” should be “strength” or “power.”³¹ In fact, scholars have stated, this word is used more than a dozen times in the OT to describe the kind of help God gives. It is not one of the four Hebrew words that describe a subordinate help. Kaiser says a more accurate translation of the original two-word phrase for the creation of woman would be “a power [or strength] corresponding to the man.”³²

Biblical scholar Aida Besançon Spencer points out that when the original Hebrew text of Gen 2:18 was translated into Greek in the Septuagint, around 250 BC, the translators used the Greek preposition *kata* followed by the pronoun “him” as its object, signifying a horizontal rather than hierarchical relationship.³³ Millard Erickson writes in his textbook on Christian theology that the expression “help meet” translates two Hebrew words, with the second word meaning “corresponding to” or “equal to” him and the first word, rendered “help,” is used of God in several places in the OT.³⁴ The 1907 *Lexicon of Hebrew and English in the Old Testament* by Brown, Driver, and Briggs provides the meaning “corresponding” for part of this phrase.³⁵ A respected Dead Sea Scrolls translation has “partner.”³⁶

Paul dramatizes such a corresponding relationship in 1 Cor 7:2–34 when he presents the same rights and responsibilities for husbands and wives in twelve key areas and never implies leadership by the husband or different roles for husband and wife.³⁷ Apparently, such a relationship is what God created and such interaction is reflective of God’s desire for husbands and wives.

It should be noted that “roles” for husbands and wives are not defined as such in Scripture. This is a theory that was developed in the 1970s as a reaction to societal changes.³⁸ Nevertheless, it is still taught in some places as if it were a tenet of Scripture.

Is Man Superior Because Created First?

Some have concluded that man is superior to woman, or at least is the leader in male/female relationships, because he was created first. Only one verse in Scripture may seem to imply this, 1 Tim 2:13, but Paul may well have been correcting myths in Ephesus that woman was created before man.³⁹ Similarly, if the firstborn is the given leader, then why would God have chosen David, Joseph, and Solomon to be leaders over their older siblings?

Some point to 1 Cor 11:9, that woman was created “for” man, as some translations have noted. Bailey, studying twenty-two translations of 1 Corinthians in various ancient languages, says a better translation is that woman was created *because* of man, not *for* him. For Bailey, the phrase that she is the “glory of man” can mean “the glory of humankind . . . created as the final climax of the creation story.”⁴⁰ Fee, author of a much-used commentary on 1 Corinthians, writes, “there is no usage of ‘glory’ anywhere in Scripture that would suggest that Paul is here advocating a subordinate relationship by means of this word.”⁴¹

Before the woman was formed, God gave instructions to the human being about the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. From what the woman says, the man, not God, told her about it after she was formed. But she is deceived by the serpent into eating from that tree. The man, whom the Bible says is present with her, eats of the tree too. Spencer explains that certain English translations may leave out the phrase “with her” in Gen 3:6 because it can be difficult to translate; however, the King James Version and various other translations do include it.⁴²

When God confronts the man and woman, she tells God that the serpent deceived her. The man blames God for creating the woman who gave him the fruit. Whose sin was greater? Some verses in the NT seem to point to greater responsibility by the man, for whatever reason (it is not stated), but unquestionably both sinned.⁴³ Regardless of who bears greater responsibility for that sin, a compassionate God announces the grand plan of the one to come who will crush the head of the enemy. Jesus, God’s own Son, will offer opportunity for salvation for both men and women.

Unabandoned

God does not want humans to eat of the tree of life and live forever in a sinful state, so God banishes them from the Garden. (The Bible presents this reason instead of a punitive one.) Adam and Eve then leave the Garden, Adam lays with Eve, and she becomes pregnant. Then Eve, unabandoned by her compassionate God, says God helps her to bring forth a son.⁴⁴

It makes no sense that God would curse woman with pain in childbirth (and this is not reportedly what the earliest translations say, as explained previously). Rather, God helps her bring forth a son. Would not a God who supposedly has cursed the woman with

pain simply stand back and let her suffer? But that is not what God does. Rather, God helps her, and Eve speaks well of her God. Both God's actions, and hers, reflect the love of God.

Multiple Bible passages describe God as full of compassion, gracious, longsuffering, and plentiful in mercy and truth. How has God's character become so besmirched in Gen 3:16, prompting many to view him as a punitive God?

Kaiser says, "seldom has so much mischief been caused by the history of a translation error which became institutionalized."⁴⁵ This "mischief" apparently developed from translators who, consciously or unconsciously, were unduly influenced by other teachings (such as the monk in the 1500s), or wanted to please people in authority, or were afraid of standing up to power and enduring the cost. Or they were simply misled by years of mistranslation or quirks of history such as added Hebrew vowels.

It is hard to believe that the ancient versions, especially the Septuagint, in their use of "turning" rather than "desire," have been abandoned by so many of today's translations. The Septuagint is considered the most important of all the ancient versions; nearly every OT passage cited in the NT shows evidence of using the Septuagint as its source; and this was the Bible used by the apostles and by the church in its early centuries.

Further, the idea of God intentionally inflicting pain on woman could result, consciously or subconsciously, in justification for men to abuse women. And some believe that this concept has been the keystone of a doctrine subordinating women to men.

Bushnell says the idea that God is punishing all women for the sin of Eve is an attack upon God's reputation for justice. She says that God punishing Christian women for the sin of Eve is "a wicked and cruel superstition, and unworthy [of] the intelligence of Christians," or, I would add, the character of God.⁴⁶

I call on translators to revisit Gen 3:16 so that it reflects the true character of God and the earliest translations, not the quirks and "mischief" in translation that bring abuse to women and men in various forms, and tarnish the reputation of God. Surely, God has not abandoned man or woman, subjugated one to the other, or established eternal punishment for all women. Rather, God is still willing, as Jesus showed, to walk with men and women as their God and leader through this sinful world and will even send Jesus once again, Scripture says, to restore God's glorious kingdom to earth.

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Notes

1. Loren Cunningham and David Hamilton, with Janice Rogers, *Why Not Women: A Fresh Look at Scripture on Women in Missions, Ministry, and Leadership* (YWAM, 2000) 40. Cunningham is cofounder of Youth With A Mission with his

wife, Darlene Cunningham. He earned three bachelor's degrees and a Master of Science in Administration of Education and was granted three Honorary DDs. In addition to cofounding Youth With A Mission, he cofounded the University of the Nations, with Dr. Howard Malmstadt, with campuses at this writing in 160 nations.

2. I. Howard Marshall (PhD, Aberdeen), "The Gospel Does Not Change but Our Perception of It May Need Revision," in *How I Changed My Mind About Women in Leadership*, ed. Alan F. Johnson (Zondervan, 2010) 146.
3. Bruce Metzger (PhD, Princeton), *The Bible in Translation, Ancient and English Versions* (Baker Academic, 2001) 189.
4. *Holy Bible*, New International Version (Zondervan, 1986) viii.
5. The Masoretes did their scribal work mainly in Tiberius by the Sea of Galilee from about AD 500 to 900.
6. Philip W. Comfort, "Afterword: Recent Developments," in *The Origin of the Bible* (Tyndale House, 1992, 2003, 2012) 334, 341. Comfort refers in particular to *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, an edition of the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible as presented in the Leningrad Codex.
7. Peter W. Flint (PhD, Notre Dame), *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (Abingdon, 2013) 37.
8. Katharine C. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women, One Hundred Bible Studies on Women's Place in the Church and Home*. Originally published 1921. Republished by Christians for Biblical Equality, 2003.
9. Bushnell addresses the difference between original consonants, vowel-letters added by scribes, and interlinear vowel-signs. Katharine C. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, Lesson 1, paragraph 6. 3.
10. See Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, Lesson 15, 50–54; also Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (PhD, Brandeis), *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (InterVarsity, 1988) 30–32. Kaiser repeated the material from *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* in a later book, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Because the material on Genesis 3:16 in the two books is nearly identical, only the first is cited in these notes. (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., Peter H. Davids, F. F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Brauch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (InterVarsity, 1996.)
11. See Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, Lesson 15, 50–54; also Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 30–32.
12. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 32.
13. Citing Bushnell's research, Kaiser writes that in the twelve known ancient versions (the Greek Septuagint, the Syriac Peshitta, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Old Latin, the Sahidic, the Bohairic, the Ethiopic, the Arabic, Aquila's Greek, Symmachus's Greek, Theodotion's Greek, and the Latin Vulgate), 21 of 28 instances of *teshuqah* in Gen 3:16, 4:7; Song 7:10) are rendered "turning," not "desire." Further, the Latin rendering is *conversio* and the Greek is *apostrophē* or *epistrophē*, words all meaning a "turning." Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 34; Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, Lessons 16–19, 54–66.
14. For a study of the Septuagint, see Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 2nd ed. (Baker Academic, 2015).
15. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 34. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, Lessons 16–19, 54–66.
16. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, Lessons 16–19, 54–66. See especially 55, 58, 60–61.
17. Again, Kaiser credits Bushnell for her research identifying this first instance. Bushnell, *God's Word to Women*, Lesson 18, 61–64. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 34.
18. In the 400 years between the OT and NT, called the

Intertestamental Period, or “Days of Mingling,” Jews lived as a minority and conquered people, and Greek thought was so pervasive that most Jews even lost knowledge of Hebrew and spoke Greek. For the first time, some scholars point out, some Jewish writings follow Greek thought for blaming women for sin’s entering humanity. *Ecclesiasticus*, written about 250 BC, written by a famous Jewish scribe, Ben Sirach of Jerusalem, is part of the Apocryphal books still used by the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Churches, and certain others, and speaks about the wickedness of women. Kenneth Bailey (ThD, Concordia), as well as other scholars, confirms that a deterioration in the place of women “seems to have taken place in the intertestamental period as seen in the writings of Ben Sirach,” an “aristocratic scholar.” Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes* (InterVarsity, 2003) 189–90. For references to other scholars, see Jane L. Crane, *Who Leads?: A Concise Look at Top Scholars on the Male/Female Question* (Wipf & Stock, 2004) 9–13, 93 #13.

19. Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women*, Lesson 18, 63–64.
20. Gordon D. Fee (PhD, Southern California) and Douglas Stuart (PhD, Harvard), *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Zondervan, 1981, 2003) 18, 30.
21. Howard G. Hendricks (DD, Wheaton) and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* (Moody, 1991, 2007) 266.
22. Howard G. Hendricks and William D. Hendricks, *Living by the Book*, 202, 209.
23. Roger Nicole (PhD, Harvard), “Biblical Concept of Women,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker, 1984) 1177.
24. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 35–36.
25. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 35.
26. Manfred T. Brauch (PhD, McMaster), *Abusing Scripture: The Consequences of Misreading the Bible* (InterVarsity, 2009) 64, 80.
27. Exod 34:6–7; Ps 86:5, 15; 103:8–13; 145:8–9; Mic 7:18–20; Rom 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9; 1 John 4:7–10.
28. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (InterVarsity, 2008) 203.
29. Ben Witherington III, *Women in the Earliest Churches* (Cambridge University Press, 1988) 212.
30. Comfort, “History of the English Bible,” in F. F. Bruce et al. *The*

Origin of the Bible, 282.

31. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 23–26.
32. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 23–26.
33. Aida Besançon Spencer (PhD, Southern Baptist), *Beyond the Curse: Women Called to Ministry* (Thomas Nelson, 1985) 25.
34. Millard J. Erickson (PhD, Northwestern), *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Baker Academic, 2013) 499.
35. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 25.
36. Martin Abegg Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible: The Oldest Known Bible Translated for the First Time into English* (HarperCollins, 1999) 7.
37. Philip B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Paul’s Letters* (Zondervan 2009) ch. 5.
38. Kevin Giles, *What the Bible Actually Teaches About Women* (Cascade, 2018) 45–50.
39. For scholars’ explanations of this theory, see Crane, *Who Leads?: A Concise Look at Top Scholars on the Male/Female Question*, 55–62.
40. Kenneth Bailey, *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (InterVarsity, 2011) 307–10.
41. Gordon D. Fee, “Praying and Prophesying in the Assemblies, I Corinthians 11:2–16,” in *Discovering Biblical Equality: Complementarity Without Hierarchy*, ed. Ronald W. Pierce, Rebecca Merrill Groothuis, and Fee (InterVarsity, 2005) 152.
42. Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 31.
43. Rom 5:12–14, 1 Cor 15:21–22. Bushnell discusses this debate in Lesson 12, 39–43.
44. Gen 4:1.
45. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*, 33.
46. Bushnell, *God’s Word to Women*, Lesson 13, 43.



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