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## Avian Theology of Johann Heinrich Zorn

Johann Heinrich Zorn (1698-1748) studied philosophy in 1716, in Altdorf and in 1717, in Jena; he was a vicar in Biensweng in 1723-1726, and then a pastor in several locations of the Pappenheim church district in Bavaria; he was also an amateur ornithologist<sup>1</sup>. He wrote some articles on spiritual matters and was looking into effective ways to instill and fortify Christian faith in people. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was the height of the development of physico-theology which deeply affected Zorn. He was impressed by Scheuchzer, Derham, Fabricius, Lesser and others who in their books ascended from the creation to the Creator<sup>2</sup>, in which process it was possible to derive the independent and infinite beauty and loveliness of God from the beauty, order, goodness, and sweetness of creation. This idea places physico-theology firmly in the tradition of the ladder/staircase to heaven tradition. Inspired by the books of physico-theologians, and by Job 35:10-11, Zorn wanted to use his long-standing ornithological interests and write a spiritual work about birds<sup>3</sup>, and he did. He first presented in 1738 a very detailed synopsis<sup>4</sup>, which he largely followed in his two-volume work of over 1300 pages on bird-theology, *Petino-theologie* (1742-1743)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The only, although meager, source of information about his life is a letter of a pastor from Dietfurt quoted in E. Stresemann, Beiträge zu einer Geschichte der deutschen Vogelkunde, *Journal für Ornithologie* 73(1925), p. 621; L. Gebhardt, *Die Ornithologen Mitteleuropas*, Gießen: Bruehl 1964, vol. 1, p. 396.

<sup>2</sup> J.H. Zorn, Zufällige Gedancken über 5. B. Mos. 4, 6. Von der Weißheit und Klugheit, so sich bey denen findet, welche die heilige Schrift gebrauchen, und gebrauchen dürfen, als einem Beweiß der Göttlichkeit derselben von aussen her, *Heißisches Heb-Opfer Theologischer und Philologischer Anmerckungen* 2(1737), pt. 12, p. 133.

<sup>3</sup> Schreiben Johann Heint[ich] Zorns, V.D.M. Pappenh[eim] dessen institutum einer Petinotheologie belangend, an W.E.B., *Fortgesetzte nützliche Anmerckungen über allerhand Materien aus der Theologie, Kirchen- und Gelehrten-Historie* 2(1738), pp. 175, 178.

<sup>4</sup> Schreiben Johann Heint[ich] Zorns, pp. 179-191.

<sup>5</sup> Πτερινόν – bird.

## Birds in nature

In the traditional framework of two books written by God, God reveals Himself in the book of nature, but people pay little attention to it and misuse God's gifts. If people looked at nature with "right eyes and good/proper consideration," they would see it as the work of an infinite wisdom and goodness (1.8)<sup>6</sup>. The reliance on the investigation of nature has an advantage over other proofs of the existence of God since it can speak equally strongly to the educated as well as to the uneducated, whereas many rational proofs may lack such a convincing power (10-12). And thus, Zorn's intention was to write not only for the educated, but also for the uneducated to lead them through the investigation of birds to God while remaining on the level of teaching about nature which can be understandable by anyone (27).

In nature, "the smallest snail gives a great, even better opportunity to recognize from its makeup and incredible art according to which it was made the power and wisdom of the one who made it than a lion or even the largest elephant" (1.17). The Bible speaks about birds as the witnesses of the divine power (Job 12:7) (19). Also, God cares about birds (19) and Christ pointed to birds as our teachers (21). In this way, Zorn found a way to reconcile his pastoral concerns with his ornithological pursuits and to use the latter in the service of spiritual edification.

The hand of God can be seen in the avian world on many levels. One is anatomy. Zorn described in fair detail the anatomy of various parts of birds' bodies: the head (1.147), the variety of its forms (148) stating that the size of the head, "the thickness of the skull, the strong jaws and muscles on them, and the way of life and feeding, which exactly fit together, indicate that a rational being had a hand in [making] it, in that the structure of the head and the intentions exactly match" (150). Zorn provided descriptions of the beak (150, 192), the neck (153), wings (157), muscles (164), the mechanism of flying (170), legs (175), oil gland (180), feathers (184), eyes (197)<sup>7</sup>, ears (209), the brain (216), lungs (227), stomach (241), kidneys (255), and genitals (257). Only about the tongue he wrote, among others, that "it is in the cavity of the beak, and is attached to the throat by a somewhat long, very thin and pointed hyoid bone, to the trachea by its muscles, and to the lower beak by the tongue frenu-

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<sup>6</sup> References are made to a volume and a page of Zorn's *Petinotheologie, oder Versuch, die Menschen durch nähere Betrachtung der Vögel zur Bewunderung, Liebe und Verehrung ihres mächtigsten, weisest- und gütigsten Schöpfers aufzumuntern*, vol. 1: Pappenheim: Christian Rau 1742; vol. 2 [...*weisest-...ermuntern*]: Schwabach: Johann Jacob Enderes 1743.

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that, according to Zorn, nothing better witnesses the art and wisdom of the Creator than the eyes of birds (1.197), and yet, in his short Latin treatise, he chose wings and feathers as such primary witnesses, J.H. Zorn, *Commentatio physico-theologica succincta, de pennis atque plumis avium, existentiae Dei testibus, Fortgesetzte nützliche Anmerkungen* 19(1745), pp. 563-578. It is likely that he wanted to use characteristic features of birds and, except for eggs, there is nothing more characteristic for birds than feathery wings.

lum. Although this organ is covered with a thick skin, it has delicate openings through which the taste of the ingested food can be felt on the inner very sensitive part; and so, the tongue serves the birds to taste the food they eat. For some it is the tool by which they draw the food to themselves, as [it is the case] with the woodpecker whose very long tongue has a sharp tip, and, in addition to this, some small hooks with which it can impale small worms in the rotten wood or the ants in their anthill and pull [them] into its mouth. It is well known that the tongue serves to swallow food; but we notice as a clear sign of Divine Providence that those birds that do not drink or drink very little, have very large salivary glands at the bottom of the chin where the hyoid bone is, from which they get enough moisture to moisten the food to swallow and dissolve it" (194). The tongue allows birds to emit voices, even sing. "Accordingly, the wisest Creator has skillfully made those species which, with their lovely voices and songs, are a pleasure for man, and which praise the glory of their Creator, and in this organ He also set a probe of his providence, wisdom and power for all eyes [to see]. If the Master had not taken precautions with regard to the formation and arrangement of this member and if the birds had been called for it without certain intentions and only at random, the structure of their tongues could and should have been the same for all of them, as in the ox, sheep, and other animals. So, it is GOD who made the birds of the sky sit among the branches and sing. Ps. 104:12" (197). This is a type of theological conclusion that Zorn drew after the description of the anatomy of each body part. It was clear to Zorn that "to ascribe their makeup to blind accident is the extreme blindness and evil. It is GOD who gave his creation life and breath and can take them away when it pleases him" (239).

After the anatomy, Zorn described the habitation of birds, which included their nests. Nests are built from particular materials, in particular places, in a particular form to protect birds from winds, in which eggs are safely stored (1.336). When the nest is ready, birds lay eggs in them (341).

The eggs are masterpieces (1.348). Zorn described their makeup, their color (360), their form (362, 2.138), and even described briefly 71 of them (2.139-155). "A very special mark of the divine wisdom, in the case of the egg, is in my opinion [the fact] that there is just as much of the feeding fluids in it as each species of the young needs, until all of the same parts are perfect, and they have become fully mature" (1.396). Variety of forms of incubating eggs are described (401), the ways of caring for the young after they hatched by feeding them (407), by teaching them how to find food, by protecting them (410), cleaning them (412), and assisting them to be self-sufficient (413).

Seasonal migration is also described (1.418): God gave birds sufficient powers and wit (Witz) to be able at the proper time to reach a proper place (428). There are birds in every part of the world including Germany, "yet various alien species migrate to us, and also here they preach the Divine power, wisdom and goodness and carry out the commands of their glorious Master"

(455). One such migration is described in some detail: “On July 25, 1739, the tile swallow (Rhein- or Mauer-Schwalbe)<sup>8</sup> becomes suddenly invisible. It has very white feathers on the belly, also over the rump, and is called by us Steuerling; as well as on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of September, water swallow (Wasser-Schwalbe) [that is] brown-colored on the back [flies away]. At that time, the house swallow (House-Schwalbe) also started its departure and left completely at October 3<sup>rd</sup>” (457), and so on in such a telegraphic diary fashion for nine pages. There is a moral lesson in this, too. “When we see storks and swallows leaving our region with the approaching autumn and approaching rough days, we should think: you, birds, despised by many, should be my teachers while you leave! You, little swallow, now, when you feel the rough air, and your abundance will turn into want, leave this region, away from my house: how often have the rough days of sufferings and of the cross frightened me; how many times has the supposed deficiency in the body and spirit struck me as so dreadful that I wanted to move away from my GOd and into the world!” (503). Migrating birds teach people that their place here on earth is not forever and that they must think about the future life and realize that, while here, they must do God’s work (504-505).

Animals and birds have been created for human use and pleasure, so, people should look at the Giver and be thankful for these gifts (1.110), and they also should not abuse nor misuse them (589). Out of the many uses, Zorn mentioned the fact that birds purify air and cattle from insects (1.523), also gardens and trees, they clear the ground (525) from snakes, mice, and snails (526), they spread seeds (527), they are used for food (529), that is, their flesh and eggs (534), the latter also for healing (535); humans are also using their bile, fat, even excrement (537); their feathers are used for fashion, pillows (540), pens, arrows, etc. (541). Zorn also included the fact that birds (eagles, hawks, etc.) are used in the many coats of armor (490), in the names of knightly orders (495), and surnames are often made after birds as much as they are after animals (498).

The intricacies of birds’ anatomy, lifestyle, procreation, etc. of birds in general are impressive and speaking about God’s design, but also the divine design is clear in the differences between various species since these differences speak about God’s care for birds in providing them with anatomy and physiology fitting their habitation and feeding environments. Zorn showed it by his presentation of differences between sexes (2.4), males being usually more opulent (5). Birds differ by the structure of their bodies which fits their feeding habits: some seeks food in water, some by waters and marshes, some in water and on land, some only on land, also some feed on flesh, some on insects, etc. (11). Accordingly, there are differences between their beaks (23), feet, fangs/talons (32, 199), and tails (40); differences in the way birds fly and walk

<sup>8</sup> For bird names, cf. K. Richter, *Non-standard bird names in England, Bavaria and Austria: a diachronic comparative study*, PhD diss., Regensburg: Universität Regensburg 2018.

(57); differences in their voices (66): their strength, frequency (69), and melody (70); differences in the kind of food (72): it is really God's goodness that they feed of variety of foods; otherwise, there would be food shortages if all birds fed on the same kind of food (77). There are differences in the kind of procreation and the care for the young (81): the differences in brooding and hatching as to time (90), place (93), the way of feeding the young (100), the frequency of brooding (108), the number of hatchlings (114), difference in the level of their maturity (120), and the ways of the preparation of nests (123). There is a variety of patterns of migration (157); differences in cleaning themselves (195), in the level birds can be tamed and trained (205), which is a sign of the goodness of God toward humans who can use such birds (207). On top of that, Zorn provided descriptions of species known to him from his area. Except for the tamed birds, he saw 127 species (442) and in his assessment, in other parts of Europe there are some 500 species (443). The descriptions are between 1-3 pages each and, as an example, here is one of shorter descriptions: "Curlew (Brach-Vogel). This is almost the same as lapwing/vanellus (Kybitz) as to the size, it also has tall legs, and has long but pointed wings, which he moves quickly while flying, and thus it quickly moves forward. On the top of the head, neck, back, and tail it looks grayish, but on the underside it is earth-colored. When it flies, it whistles extremely loudly so that it can be heard from afar and thus it gives itself away when it flies by vanellus birds. It comes here in the fall and spring and stays by the water and in fields not far from it, but does not breed in these areas. Its venison is said to be very tasty and is therefore only served on important men's tables. I do not know how to distinguish a male from a female" (425). A theological summary of all such descriptions states that "each bird and its particular makeup of inner and outer parts and members, its way of life and feeding, its color, the drive/instinct allotted to it to fly away or to stay or to come here from foreign lands, its voice and singing, its venison, feathers, etc., are clear witnesses of an all-good but also infinitely wise and powerful Creator who, what he did to these creatures, he has done for the sake of a certain end [that is] good and salutary for humans" (443).

### **Birds and the Bible**

There are two aspects of the presence of birds in the Bible: natural and spiritual, often in an intertwined fashion.

One Biblical detail Zorn was interested in was the material from which birds were created. Although the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and Luther's translation say that birds were created from water, not from earth (1.117), Zorn insisted that Gen. 2:10 clearly states that birds were made from earth (121-122). Also, it is uncertain whether at the beginning just one pair of each species was created or there were enough pairs to cover all lands. The former is more likely (91); however, some species would very quickly be extinguished by the birds of prey (95). Maybe at the beginning these birds fed on something else than on

the flesh of other birds. During the flood, birds of prey were for a year in the ark and they were fed undoubtedly with something else than flesh (96). Maybe they ate fish. Foxes and wolves in cages are fed with bread and cooked fruit, so it could have been with such birds (97). Also, originally there may have been just one pair of each species, since the first blessing was on the fifth day concerning multiplication (Gen. 1:21-22) (86). As Zorn's thought experiment with six breeding cycles of the white throistle (Weiß-Droschel, Zippen) indicates (98), if each pair brings 6 pairs, then after 6 cycles there will be 46,656 pairs (99). Zorn simply spoke about a geometrical progression ( $46,656 = 6^6$ ) indicating that birds could very quickly multiply to inhabit large portions of the earth.

One important context in which birds were presented in the Bible as natural creatures is in the list of prohibited foods. The birds included in the list of unclean birds are not all easily recognizable today and Zorn gave a very learned philological and naturalistic discussion in trying to identify these birds. What is interesting is his opinion about the reason for such a prohibition. In his view, the division between clean and unclean birds was not based on the nature of birds, but it depended purely on the free will of God, since, for example, eating the flesh of unclean stork would not do any harm (453). Through such prohibitions and permissions some virtues have been recommended: e.g., gentleness through the pigeon, God's care through the sparrow, purity through the swallow, the return of sinners to God through the crane; on the other hand, thievery through the raven, the works of darkness through the owl, etc. (454). The prohibition was also a reminder of the loss of lordship over and of the free use of creatures (521). It was also a means to single out the Jews from among other peoples so that they should not mix with the peoples who did not have such prohibitions (523). Besides, the flesh of some of the unclean birds does have bad taste (524).

Birds are also mentioned in the Bible for purely spiritual purposes. First of all, God created birds to show Himself to humans through them as almighty, wise, and good. There is no greater power than the ability to create something out of nothing as it is the ability to create life from lifeless matter (1.130). God also wanted to show His omniscience (134). Moreover, God cares about birds (19) and if He cares about such insignificant birds as sparrows and ravens, all the more about humans of whom He is the Father; looking at these birds, people should see the goodness and love of God, His wisdom (24); they should be thankful that along with birds, God made them so wonderfully, that He so fatherly cares for them (510). That is, birds teach people about God's care (Job 39:3) (512) and thus people should not be proud and should not count on their riches, and they should be prudent like doves (520).

Somewhere between the physical and spiritual aspects of birds in the Biblical context we can consider Zorn's discussion of the avian mind-body problem.

Animals and birds have a soul that has sensory representations and memory (1.276). Their movements cannot be explained by considering them machines as Descartes claimed, since, in machines, motion is always the same

(278). Birds have a soul different from the body (280), but they do not have reason. There is a different body in humans and animals, 1 Cor. 15:39, the same can also be said about their souls (293). Reason is in the spirit which also has the free will. Birds have only sensory impressions and representations (282, 288) and thus only sensory needs (283). These souls have no parts; they are spiritual substances lower than the spirits of humans (289); they are not immortal, but they are incorruptible and indestructible as far as they are related to some created power. Since they have no reason nor will, there is for them no reward or punishment, so probably at the end of the world they will be dissolved with the elements; in the meantime, it should “be left to their Creator in what way he will use them for his glory” (289). Although the mental powers of birds are limited in comparison with the rationality of the human soul, they are nevertheless remarkable. Birds can return to their nests which is on a tree among thousands of similar trees. As Zorn himself observed, a siskin (Zeißlein) that lived in his house was able to come back after a few days of absence (296). Moreover, because of the non-mechanical nature of birds, they have the five senses and, in particular, they can feel pain. Therefore, Zorn was adamantly opposed to the abuse of birds which included inflicting pain on them. For example, singing birds were sometimes blinded (2.662) or their both legs were broken (664). What pain must these birds experience (665), lamented Zorn.

### Afterlife

After looking at everything that relates to birds, a person “would have to be unmoved like a log when not seeing in it an All-knowing, All-powerful and Good Creator and Lord” and not be awakened to praise Him (2.731). This praise should manifest itself in the lives lived by people since this kind of life opens the gate to the blessed prospects in the afterlife. And Zorn was certain that such a life exists.

The more we know, the better we see that our knowledge will always be partial<sup>9</sup>. Human desire for knowledge will never be fully satisfied on earth. However, Zorn believed that this desire will not be satisfied in the afterlife either. The blessed in the eternal life are not infinite nor perfect beings and so they should always be able to grow (708) and thus there will be constant growth in heaven (714). There will always be a difference between the infinite God and a finite creation (710). The intellect will be occupied with God’s unity, omnipotence, omniscience, etc. and no less with the works of God, with nature (716). With nature in the afterlife? “The world is a mirror in which God’s wisdom, power, goodness, and justice can in this life be seen.” We can know only very small fraction about this world. God, therefore, would not accomplish His goal that humans know Him though nature (718). New bodies

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<sup>9</sup> I.H. Zorn, *Gedancken von dem Wachsthum der Seligen am Erkenntnis, Fortgesetzte nützliche Anmerkungen* 21(1746), p. 705.

with sharper senses will be able to move everywhere through space to see bodies which cannot be seen now even through telescopes. Therefore, when the earth passes away, the entire universe will not, but it will be a field open for investigation to the blessed (719). There will be no earth, said Zorn, but the rest of the universe will be still in place. Interestingly, Zorn did not follow Biblical teaching about the new heaven and the new earth, but, still, nature, if only extraterrestrial, will be in place for its investigation to continue, this time, on the truly cosmic scale. Will the blessed encounter inhabitants somewhere in the cosmos? Possibly, more than that. In passing, Zorn mentioned the rule of the blessed over innumerable worlds; also, the work of salvation, and God's judgments (716) over angels and humans and the finite intellect can occupy itself with these things throughout eternity (718). To rule over a world, there must be someone there to rule over and maybe the work of salvation by the blessed will be extended to these inhabitants.

### Theodicy

Arguably the most unsatisfactory aspect of physico-theological books is the treatment of theodicy. Admittedly, this is one of the most difficult theological problems and it is far from a satisfactory solution. Zorn did speak of rather unsavory aspects of avian reality, but most of the time he did not try to explain them. In a way, there is not much to say on the subject: God always chooses the best and actualizes it through the best means (1.134) which humans not always can understand (135). For example, one reason why birds' feathers and beaks have such a variety of colors is for them to be able to recognize enemies from afar, so that birds can flee (572). The problem why birds of prey must exist is not raised, although a tantalizing remark was made that all birds and animals were tame at the beginning (610).

Zorn discussed in a separate section what can be harmful to wild birds (2.692) and mentioned bad and cold weather (694), protracted rain (695), hail (696), and cold winter (697). Through the goodness of God, no species entirely perished because of such misfortunes (702). God does not allow that any "member of the sequence and chain of created things will be pulled out," so that the integrity of the whole is not undermined. In all this, the question why God allows for such harmful situations to take place was not raised.

Some of Zorn's grappling with the problem of evil is in a pamphlet devoted to a plague of mice. But most of it is a discussion done through the lens of biology. Zorn debunked various reasons given for the appearance of this plague concluding that the causes why the mice multiply themselves frequently and prodigiously are natural and depend on weather and the kind of environment<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> J.H. Zorn, *Physicalisch und theologische Gedanken, über die Mäuse-Plage, welche 1742. in Teutschland die Fränkischen, Schwäbischen und Rheinischen Creysse, sonderlich aber die Gegenden an der Alt-Mühl betroffen*, [Dietfurth 1742, reissued in 1773], p. 13.



So much for Zorn the naturalist. However, Zorn the pastor also did not want to deny that God had His hand in it. Everything in creation happens according to His will. God uses animals to punish people (Jer. 15:3) and, in particular, mice (1 Sam. 6:5), the army of the Lord (15). In all plagues that can be explained by natural causes, we should also see the finger of God. This should teach us about the power of God and our powerlessness when we cannot defend ourselves against such a despised creature as mice. They should be a warning even to people in unaffected areas (16). Incidentally, Zorn also mentioned that God can use plagues of birds as punishment (2.535).

The lack of any serious treatment of the theodicy problem can be considered a deficiency of the *Petinotheologie*. The book did not, in fact, get much traction. However, arguably the most important reason is the lack of illustrations. Zorn was aware of this deficiency and he said in the preface to the reader that opens the second volume that, hopefully, some supplements will be added with color copper plates showing most eggs with cross-sections and nests (2.[10]). He commissioned an artist, Thomas Trölsch, who depicted these eggs, nests, and parts of birds (156), but apparently the project was not completed and no supplement to the book saw the light of day. This is regrettable.

Incidentally, publishing success or not, the *Petinotheologie* gave Zorn a taste of scholarly and theological work on a large scale and he planned to write a similar work about bees, the *Melissotheologie*, as testified by a detailed synopsis of this planned book<sup>11</sup>. However, the book never appeared, but the idea did not die with Zorn; two decades later came out a slim book, the *Melittotheologia*, written by a fellow pastor-naturalist enthusiast who did not appear to have known about Zorn's efforts in this direction<sup>12</sup>.

To conclude, a rare early book review stated that “things are well researched and he/Zorn makes shine [the fact] how well-read he is” (37)<sup>13</sup>. This is no exaggeration. The book is heavily footnoted, the preface includes a list of 165 references (plus 30 more in the preface to the second volume) related more or less closely to the bird problem. Numerous times Zorn related his own observations, some of them for several pages. So, it is a work of a competent naturalist and could serve as an excellent popularization of ornithology. However, the naturalistic aspect of the book was clearly secondary for Zorn the pastor. It was a work in which through the wonders of the avian world he wanted to draw

<sup>11</sup> Schreiben Joh[ann] He[i]nr[ich] Zorn's an den Editorem der fortgesetzten nützlichen Anmerkungen [added only in the table of contents: darinnen er einen Entwurf seiner Melisso-Theologie liefert], *Fortgesetzte nützliche Anmerkungen* 18(1744), pp. 463-503. Μέλισσα (Attic: μέλιττα) – a bee.

<sup>12</sup> A.G. Schirach [Hadam Bohuchwał Šěrach], *Melittotheologia. Die Verherrlichung des glorwürdigen Schöpfers aus der wundervollen Biene*, Dresden 1767.

<sup>13</sup> [A review of the *Petinotheologie*], *Neue Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* 1743, no. 4, p. 37. Cf. a more recent opinion that the *Petinotheologie* is a “remarkable book of a splendid field ornithologist”, E. Stresemann, Baron von Pernau, pioneer student of bird behavior, *The Auk* 64(1947), p. 52.

the reader to the Author of this world and thereby to the serious thinking about one's own soul and its fate in this world and the next.

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## Avian Theology of Johann Heinrich Zorn

### Summary

Johann Heinrich Zorn (1698-1748) was a pastor in Bavaria and an amateur but competent ornithologist. Following the many physico-theological books published in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote his *Petinotheologie* in which he used ornithological knowledge for theological and spiritual purposes. He included extensive descriptions of the anatomy, physiology, living and migration patterns of birds to show the orderliness and harmony in each aspect of avian lives, which was for him an undeniable proof of God's wisdom, power, and goodness.

**Keywords:** Johann Heinrich Zorn, physico-theology, theodicy.

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