

# Abba, Father!

by George MacDonald

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*In 'Abba, Father!', George MacDonald explores the profound relationship between God and humanity, emphasizing our identity as His children and the significance of recognizing Him as our true Father.*

**Scripture:** Romans 8:15, Romans 8:23, Galatians 4:4, Ephesians 1:5, Philippians 3:20

**Topics:** "God The Father", "Spiritual Adoption"

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## Description

George MacDonald preaches about the deep significance of calling God 'Father' from a full heart, emphasizing the importance of understanding and embracing the spirit of adoption as true sons and daughters of God. He challenges the traditional doctrine of Adoption, highlighting the need for a personal, heartfelt relationship with God as our Father, rather than a legalistic or distant concept of adoption. MacDonald stresses the essential role of love, faith, and honest skepticism in seeking to know God as our Father, encouraging believers to question and seek a genuine connection with God as his children.

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## Transcript

'--the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.'--Romans viii. 15.

The hardest, gladdest thing in the world is, to cry Father! from a full heart. I would help whom I may to call thus upon the Father.

There are things in all forms of the systematic teaching of Christianity to check this outgoing of the heart--with some to render it simply impossible. The more delicate the affections, the less easy to satisfy, the readier are they to be damped and discouraged, yea quite blown aside; even the suspicion of a cold reception is enough to paralyze them. Such a cold wind blowing at the very gate of heaven--thank God, outside the gate!--is the so-called doctrine of Adoption. When a heart hears--and believes, or half believes--that it is not the child of God by origin, from the first of its being, but may possibly be adopted into his family, its love sinks at once in a cold faint: where is its own father, and who is this that would adopt it? To myself, in the morning of childhood, the evil doctrine was a mist through which the light came struggling, a cloud-phantom of repellent mien-requiring maturer thought and truer knowledge to dissipate it. But it requires neither much knowledge nor much insight to stand up against its hideousness; it needs but love that will not be denied, and courage to question the phantom.

A devout and honest scepticism on God's side, not to be put down by anything called authority, is absolutely necessary to him who would know the liberty wherewith Christ maketh free. Whatever any

company of good men thinks or believes, is to be approached with respect; but nothing claimed or taught, be the claimers or the teachers who they may, must come between the soul and the spirit of the father, who is himself the teacher of his children. Nay, to accept authority may be to refuse the very thing the 'authority' would teach; it may remain altogether misunderstood just for lack of that natural process of doubt and inquiry, which we were intended to go through by him who would have us understand.

As no scripture is of private interpretation, so is there no feeling in human heart which exists in that heart alone, which is not, in some form or degree, in every heart; and thence I conclude that many must have groaned like myself under the supposed authority of this doctrine. The refusal to look up to God as our Father is the one central wrong in the whole human affair; the inability, the one central misery: whatever serves to clear any difficulty from the way of the recognition of the Father, will more or less undermine every difficulty in life.

'Is God then not my Father,' cries the heart of the child, 'that I need to be adopted by him? Adoption! that can never satisfy me. Who is my father? Am I not his to begin with? Is God not my very own Father? Is he my Father only in a sort or fashion--by a legal contrivance? Truly, much love may lie in adoption, but if I accept it from any one, I allow myself the child of another! The adoption of God would indeed be a blessed thing if another than he had given me being! but if he gave me being, then it means no reception, but a repudiation.--"O Father, am I not your child?"'

'No; but he will adopt you. He will not acknowledge you his child, but he will call you his child, and be a father to you.'

'Alas!' cries the child, 'if he be not my father, he cannot become my father. A father is a father from the beginning. A primary relation cannot be superinduced. The consequence might be small where earthly fatherhood was concerned, but the very origin of my being--alas, if he be only a maker and not a father! Then am I only a machine, and not a child--not a man! It is false to say I was created in his image!

'It avails nothing to answer that we lost our birthright by the fall. I do not care to argue that I did not fall when Adam fell; for I have fallen many a time, and there is a shadow on my soul which I or another may call a curse; I cannot get rid of a something that always intrudes between my heart and the blue of every sky. But it avails nothing, either for my heart or their argument, to say I have fallen and been cast out: can any repudiation, even that of God, undo the facts of an existent origin? Nor is it merely that he made me: by whose power do I go on living? When he cast me out, as you say, did I then begin to draw my being from myself--or from the devil? In whom do I live and move and have my being? It cannot be that I am not the creature of God.'

'But creation is not fatherhood.'

'Creation in the image of God, is. And if I am not in the image of God, how can the word of God be of any meaning to me? "He called them gods to whom the word of God came," says the Master himself. To be fit to receive his word implies being of his kind. No matter how his image may have been defaced in me: the thing defaced is his image, remains his defaced image--an image yet that can hear his word. What makes me evil and miserable is, that the thing spoiled in me is the image of the Perfect. Nothing can be evil but in virtue of a good hypostasis. No, no! nothing can make it that I am not the child of God. If one say, "Look at the animals: God made them: you do not call them the children of God!" I answer: "But I am to blame; they are not to blame! I cling fast to my blame: it is the seal of my childhood." I have nothing to argue from in the animals, for I do not understand them. Two things only I am sure of: that God is to them "a faithful

creator;" and that the sooner I put in force my claim to be a child of God, the better for them; for they too are fallen, though without blame.'

'But you are evil: how can you be a child of the Good?'

'Just as many an evil son is the child of a good parent.'

'But in him you call a good parent, there yet lay evil, and that accounts for the child being evil.'

'I cannot explain. God let me be born through evil channels. But in whatever manner I may have become an unworthy child, I cannot thereby have ceased to be a child of God--his child in the way that a child must ever be the child of the man of whom he comes. Is it not proof--this complaint of my heart at the word Adoption? Is it not the spirit of the child, crying out, "Abba, Father"?''

'Yes; but that is the spirit of adoption; the text says so.'

'Away with your adoption! I could not even be adopted if I were not such as the adoption could reach--that is, of the nature of God. Much as he may love him, can a man adopt a dog? I must be of a nature for the word of God to come to--yea, so far, of the divine nature, of the image of God! Heartily do I grant that, had I been left to myself, had God dropped me, held no communication with me, I could never have thus cried, never have cared when they told me I was not a child of God. But he has never repudiated me, and does not now desire to adopt me. Pray, why should it grieve me to be told I am not a child of God, if I be not a child of God? If you say--Because you have learned to love him, I answer--Adoption would satisfy the love of one who was not but would be a child; for me, I cannot do without a father, nor can any adoption give me one.'

'But what is the good of all you say, if the child is such that the father cannot take him to his heart?'

'Ah, indeed, I grant you, nothing!--so long as the child does not desire to be taken to the father's heart; but the moment he does, then it is everything to the child's heart that he should be indeed the child of him after whom his soul is thirsting. However bad I may be, I am the child of God, and therein lies my blame. Ah, I would not lose my blame! in my blame lies my hope. It is the pledge of what I am, and what I am not; the pledge of what I am meant to be, what I shall one day be, the child of God in spirit and in truth.'

'Then you dare to say the apostle is wrong in what he so plainly teaches?'

'By no means; what I do say is, that our English presentation of his teaching is in this point very misleading. It is not for me to judge the learned and good men who have revised the translation of the New Testament--with so much gain to every one whose love of truth is greater than his loving prejudice for accustomed form;--I can only say, I wonder what may have been their reasons for retaining this word adoption. In the New Testament the word is used only by the apostle Paul. Liddell and Scott give the meaning--"Adoption as a son," which is a mere submission to popular theology: they give no reference except to the New Testament. The relation of the word *niogesia* to the form *qetoV*, which means "taken," or rather, "placed as one's child," is, I presume, the sole ground for the so translating of it: usage plentiful and invariable could not justify that translation here, in the face of what St. Paul elsewhere shows he means by the word. The Greek word might be variously meant--though I can find no use of it earlier than St. Paul; the English can mean but one thing, and that is not what St. Paul means. "The spirit of adoption" Luther translates "the spirit of a child;" adoption he translates *kindschaft*, or childship.'

Of two things I am sure--first, that by nioqesia St. Paul did not intend adoption; and second, that if the Revisers had gone through what I have gone through because of the word, if they had felt it come between God and their hearts as I have felt it, they could not have allowed it to remain in their version.

Once more I say, the word used by St Paul does not imply that God adopts children that are not his own, but rather that a second time he fathers his own; that a second time they are born--this time from above; that he will make himself tenfold, yea, infinitely their father: he will have them back into the very bosom whence they issued, issued that they might learn they could live nowhere else; he will have them one with himself. It was for the sake of this that, in his Son, he died for them.

Let us look at the passage where he reveals his use of the word. It is in another of his epistles--that to the Galatians: iv. 1-7.

'But I say that so long as the heir is a child, he differeth nothing from a bondservant, though he is lord of all; but is under guardians and stewards until the term appointed of the father. So we also, when we were children, were held in bondage under the rudiments of the world: but when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father. So that thou art no longer a bondservant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.'

How could the Revisers choose this last reading, 'an heir through God,' and keep the word adoption? From the passage it is as plain as St. Paul could make it, that, by the word translated adoption, he means the raising of a father's own child from the condition of tutelage and subjection to others, a state which, he says, is no better than that of a slave, to the position and rights of a son. None but a child could become a son; the idea is--a spiritual coming of age; only when the child is a man is he really and fully a son. The thing holds in the earthly relation. How many children of good parents--good children in the main too--never know those parents, never feel towards them as children might, until, grown up, they have left the house--until, perhaps, they are parents themselves, or are parted from them by death! To be a child is not necessarily to be a son or daughter. The childhood is the lower condition of the upward process towards the sonship, the soil out of which the true sonship shall grow, the former without which the latter were impossible. God can no more than an earthly parent be content to have only children: he must have sons and daughters--children of his soul, of his spirit, of his love--not merely in the sense that he loves them, or even that they love him, but in the sense that they love like him, love as he loves. For this he does not adopt them; he dies to give them himself, thereby to raise his own to his heart; he gives them a birth from above; they are born again out of himself and into himself--for he is the one and the all. His children are not his real, true sons and daughters until they think like him, feel with him, judge as he judges, are at home with him, and without fear before him because he and they mean the same thing, love the same things, seek the same ends. For this are we created; it is the one end of our being, and includes all other ends whatever. It can come only of unbelief and not faith, to make men believe that God has cast them off, repudiated them, said they are not, yea never were, his children--and he all the time spending himself to make us the children he designed, foreordained--children who would take him for their Father! He is our father all the time, for he is true; but until we respond with the truth of children, he cannot let all the father out to us; there is no place for the dove of his tenderness to alight. He is our father, but we are not his children. Because we are his children, we must become his sons and daughters. Nothing will satisfy him, or do for us, but that we be one with our father! What else could serve! How else should life ever be a good! Because we are the sons of God, we must become the sons of God.

There may be among my readers--alas for such!--to whom the word Father brings no cheer, no dawn, in whose heart it rouses no tremble of even a vanished emotion. It is hardly likely to be their fault. For though as children we seldom love up to the mark of reason; though we often offend; and although the conduct of some children is inexplicable to the parent who loves them; yet, if the parent has been but ordinarily kind, even the son who has grown up a worthless man, will now and then feel, in his better moments, some dim reflex of childship, some faintly pleasant, some slightly sorrowful remembrance of the father around whose neck his arms had sometimes clung. In my own childhood and boyhood my father was the refuge from all the ills of life, even sharp pain itself. Therefore I say to son or daughter who has no pleasure in the name Father, 'You must interpret the word by all that you have missed in life. Every time a man might have been to you a refuge from the wind, a covert from the tempest, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land, that was a time when a father might have been a father indeed. Happy you are yet, if you have found man or woman such a refuge; so far have you known a shadow of the perfect, seen the back of the only man, the perfect Son of the perfect Father. All that human tenderness can give or desire in the nearness and readiness of love, all and infinitely more must be true of the perfect Father--of the maker of fatherhood, the Father of all the fathers of the earth, specially the Father of those who have specially shown a father-heart.'

This Father would make to himself sons and daughters indeed--that is, such sons and daughters as shall be his sons and daughters not merely by having come from his heart, but by having returned thither--children in virtue of being such as whence they came, such as choose to be what he is. He will have them share in his being and nature--strong wherein he cares for strength; tender and gracious as he is tender and gracious; angry where and as he is angry. Even in the small matter of power, he will have them able to do whatever his Son Jesus could on the earth, whose was the life of the perfect man, whose works were those of perfected humanity. Everything must at length be subject to man, as it was to The Man. When God can do what he will with a man, the man may do what he will with the world; he may walk on the sea like his Lord; the deadliest thing will not be able to hurt him:--'He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater than these shall he do.'

God, whose pleasure brought

Man into being, stands away

As it were, an handbreath off, to give

Room for the newly-made to live.

He has made us, but we have to be. All things were made through the Word, but that which was made in the Word was life, and that life is the light of men: they who live by this light, that is, live as Jesus lived--by obedience, namely, to the Father, have a share in their own making; the light becomes life in them; they are, in their lower way, alive with the life that was first born in Jesus, and through him has been born in them--by obedience they become one with the godhead: 'As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God.' He does not make them the sons of God, but he gives them power to become the sons of God: in choosing and obeying the truth, man becomes the true son of the Father of lights.

It is enough to read with understanding the passage I have quoted from his epistle to the Galatians, to see that the word adoption does not in the least fit St. Paul's idea, or suit the things he says. While we but obey the law God has laid upon us, without knowing the heart of the Father whence comes the law, we are but

slaves--not necessarily ignoble slaves, yet slaves; but when we come to think with him, when the mind of the son is as the mind of the Father, the action of the son the same as that of the Father, then is the son of the Father, then are we the sons of God. And in both passages--this, and that which, from his epistle to the Romans, I have placed at the head of this sermon--we find the same phrase, Abba, Father, showing, if proof were needful, that he uses the word *niogesia* in the same sense in both: nothing can well be plainer, that needs consideration at all, than what that sense is. Let us glance at the other passages in which he uses the same word: as he alone of the writers of the New Testament does use it, so, for aught I know, he may have made it for himself. One of them is in the same eighth chapter of the epistle to the Romans; this I will keep to the last. Another is in the following chapter, the fourth verse; in it he speaks of the *niogesia*, literally the son-placing (that is, the placing of sons in the true place of sons), as belonging to the Jews. On this I have but to remark that 'whose is the *niogesia*' cannot mean either that they had already received it, or that it belonged to the Jews more than to the Gentiles; it can only mean that, as the elder-brother-nation, they had a foremost claim to it, and would naturally first receive it; that, in their best men, they had always been nearest to it. It must be wrought out first in such as had received the preparation necessary; those were the Jews; of the Jews was the Son, bringing the *niogesia*, the sonship, to all. Therefore theirs was the *niogesia*, just as theirs was the gospel. It was to the Jew first, then to the Gentile--though many a Gentile would have it before many a Jew. Those and only those who out of a true heart cry 'Abba, Father,' be they of what paltry little so-called church, other than the body of Christ, they may, or of no other at all, are the sons and daughters of God.

St. Paul uses the word also in his epistle to the Ephesians, the first chapter, the fifth verse. 'Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself,' says the authorized version; 'Having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself,' says the revised--and I see little to choose between them: neither gives the meaning of St. Paul. If there is anything gained by the addition of the words 'of children' in the one case, and 'as sons' in the other, to translate the word for which 'adoption' alone is made to serve in the other passages, the advantage is only to the minus-side, to that of the wrong interpretation.

Children we were; true sons we could never be, save through The Son. He brothers us. He takes us to the knees of the Father, beholding whose face we grow sons indeed. Never could we have known the heart of the Father, never felt it possible to love him as sons, but for him who cast himself into the gulf that yawned between us. In and through him we were foreordained to the sonship: sonship, even had we never sinned, never could we reach without him. We should have been little children loving the Father indeed, but children far from the sonhood that understands and adores. 'For as many as are led by the spirit of God, these are sons of God;' 'If any man hath not the spirit of Christ, he is none of his;' yea, if we have not each other's spirits, we do not belong to each other. There is no unity but having the same spirit. There is but one spirit, that of truth.

It remains to note yet another passage.

That never in anything he wrote was it St. Paul's intention to contribute towards a system of theology, it were easy to show: one sign of the fact is, that he does not hesitate to use this word he has perhaps himself made, in different, and apparently opposing, though by no means contradictory senses: his meanings always vivify each other. His ideas are so large that they tax his utterance and make him strain the use of words, but there is no danger to the honest heart, which alone he regards, of misunderstanding them, though 'the ignorant and unsteadfast wrest them' yet. At one time he speaks of the sonship as being the possession of the Israelite, at another as his who has learned to cry Abba, Father; and here, in the

passage I have now last to consider, that from the 18th to the 25th verse of this same eighth chapter of his epistle to the Romans, he speaks of the nioqesia as yet to come--and as if it had to do, not with our spiritual, but our bodily condition. This use of the word, however, though not the same use as we find anywhere else, is nevertheless entirely consistent with his other uses of it.

The 23rd verse says, 'And not only so, but ourselves also, which have the first fruits of the spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for adoption, the redemption of our body.'

It is nowise difficult to discern that the ideas in this and the main use are necessarily associated and more than consistent. The putting of a son in his true, his foreordained place, has outward relations as well as inward reality; the outward depends on the inward, arises from it, and reveals it. When the child whose condition under tutors had passed away, took his position as a son, he would naturally change his dress and modes of life: when God's children cease to be slaves doing right from law and duty, and become his sons doing right from the essential love of God and their neighbour, they too must change the garments of their slavery for the robes of liberty, lay aside the body of this death, and appear in bodies like that of Christ, with whom they inherit of the Father. But many children who have learned to cry Abba, Father, are yet far from the liberty of the sons of God. Sons they are and no longer children, yet they groan as being still in bondage!--Plainly the apostle has no thought of working out an idea; with burning heart he is writing a letter: he gives, nevertheless, lines plentifully sufficient for us to work out his idea, and this is how it takes clear shape:--

We are the sons of God the moment we lift up our hearts, seeking to be sons--the moment we begin to cry Father. But as the world must be redeemed in a few men to begin with, so the soul is redeemed in a few of its thoughts and wants and ways, to begin with: it takes a long time to finish the new creation of this redemption. Shall it have taken millions of years to bring the world up to the point where a few of its inhabitants shall desire God, and shall the creature of this new birth be perfected in a day? The divine process may indeed now go on with tenfold rapidity, for the new factor of man's fellow-working, for the sake of which the whole previous array of means and forces existed, is now developed; but its end is yet far below the horizon of man's vision:--

The apostle speaks at one time of the thing as to come, at another time as done--when it is but commenced: our ways of thought are such. A man's heart may leap for joy the moment when, amidst the sea-waves, a strong hand has laid hold of the hair of his head; he may cry aloud, 'I am saved;!--and he may be safe, but he is not saved; this is far from a salvation to suffice. So are we sons when we begin to cry Father, but we are far from perfected sons. So long as there is in us the least taint of distrust, the least lingering of hate or fear, we have not received the sonship; we have not such life in us as raised the body of Jesus; we have not attained to the resurrection of the dead--by which word, in his epistle to the Philippians (iii. 2), St. Paul means, I think, the same thing as here he means by the sonship which he puts in apposition with the redemption of the body:--

Until our outward condition is that of sons royal, sons divine; so long as the garments of our souls, these mortal bodies, are mean--torn and dragged and stained; so long as we groan under sickness and weakness and weariness, old age, forgetfulness, and all heavy things; so long we have not yet received the sonship in full--we are but getting ready one day to creep from our chrysalids, and spread the great heaven-storming wings of the psyches of God. We groan being burdened; we groan, waiting for the sonship--to wit, the redemption of the body--the uplifting of the body to be a fit house and revelation of the indwelling spirit--nay, like that of Christ, a fit temple and revelation of the deeper indwelling God. For we

shall always need bodies to manifest and reveal us to each other--bodies, then, that fit the soul with absolute truth of presentment and revelation. Hence the revealing of the sons of God, spoken of in the 19th verse, is the same thing as the redemption of the body; the body is redeemed when it is made fit for the sons of God; then it is a revelation of them--the thing it was meant for, and always, more or less imperfectly, was. Such it shall be, when truth is strong enough in the sons of God to make it such--for it is the soul that makes the body. When we are the sons of God in heart and soul, then shall we be the sons of God in body too: 'we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.'

I care little to speculate on the kind of this body; two things only I will say, as needful to be believed, concerning it: first, that it will be a body to show the same self as before--but, second, a body to show the being truly--without the defects, that is, and imperfections of the former bodily revelation. Even through their corporeal presence shall we then know our own infinitely better, and find in them endlessly more delight, than before. These things we must believe, or distrust the Father of our spirits. Till this redemption of the body arrives, the nioqesia is not wrought out, is only upon the way. Nor can it come but by our working out the salvation he is working in us.

This redemption of the body--its deliverance from all that is amiss, awry, unfinished, weak, worn out, all that prevents the revelation of the sons of God, is called by the apostle, not certainly the adoption, but the nioqesia, the sonship in full manifestation. It is the slave yet left in the sons and daughters of God that has betrayed them into even permitting the word adoption to mislead them!

To see how the whole utterance hangs together, read from the 18th verse to the 25th, especially noticing the 19th: 'For the earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing' (the outshining) 'of the sons of God.' When the sons of God show as they are, taking, with the character, the appearance and the place that belong to their sonship; when the sons of God sit with the Son of God on the throne of their Father; then shall they be in potency of fact the lords of the lower creation, the bestowers of liberty and peace upon it; then shall the creation, subjected to vanity for their sakes, find its freedom in their freedom, its gladness in their sonship. The animals will glory to serve them, will joy to come to them for help. Let the heartless scoff, the unjust despise! the heart that cries Abba, Father, cries to the God of the sparrow and the oxen; nor can hope go too far in hoping what that God will do for the creation that now groaneth and travaileth in pain because our higher birth is delayed. Shall not the judge of all the earth do right? Shall my heart be more compassionate than his?

If to any reader my interpretation be unsatisfactory, I pray him not to spend his strength in disputing my faith, but in making sure his own progress on the way to freedom and sonship. Only to the child of God is true judgment possible. Were it otherwise, what would it avail to prove this one or that right or wrong? Right opinion on questions the most momentous will deliver no man. Cure for any ill in me or about me there is none, but to become the son of God I was born to be. Until such I am, until Christ is born in me, until I am revealed a son of God, pain and trouble will endure--and God grant they may! Call this presumption, and I can only widen my assertion: until you yourself are the son of God you were born to be, you will never find life a good thing. If I presume for myself, I presume for you also. But I do not presume. Thus have both Jesus Christ and his love-slave Paul represented God--as a Father perfect in love, grand in self-forgetfulness, supreme in righteousness, devoted to the lives he has uttered. I will not believe less of the Father than I can conceive of glory after the lines he has given me, after the radiation of his glory in the face of his Son. He is the express image of the Father, by which we, his imperfect images, are to read and understand him: imperfect, we have yet perfection enough to spell towards the perfect.

It comes to this then, after the grand theory of the apostle:--The world exists for our education; it is the nursery of God's children, served by troubled slaves, troubled because the children are themselves slaves--children, but not good children. Beyond its own will or knowledge, the whole creation works for the development of the children of God into the sons of God. When at last the children have arisen and gone to their Father; when they are clothed in the best robe, with a ring on their hands and shoes on their feet, shining out at length in their natural, their predestined sonship; then shall the mountains and the hills break forth before them into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Then shall the wolf dwell with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid and the calf, and the young lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. Then shall the fables of a golden age, which faith invented, and unbelief threw into the past, unfold their essential reality, and the tale of paradise prove itself a truth by becoming a fact. Then shall every ideal show itself a necessity, aspiration although satisfied put forth yet longer wings, and the hunger after righteousness know itself blessed. Then first shall we know what was in the Shepherd's mind when he said, 'I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly.'

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