

## **Matthew themes**

### Prologue

This is the second in a series of online talks that are intended eventually to cover the whole of the New Testament. I am planning to look in turn at the three major theological streams that contribute to it: firstly the Synoptic Gospels – Mark, Matthew and Luke – and the book of Acts; secondly the Pauline letters; and thirdly the Gospel and letters of John; and then to finish with the six books that do not fall into any of these groups. I am beginning with the Synoptic tradition, not because these books were the first to be written – almost certainly they were not – but because they tell the story of Jesus and the earliest Christians and in that sense lay a foundation for everything else.

The first talk was on the Gospel of Mark, because although it comes second in our Bibles, it was almost certainly the first Gospel to be written. Also, as we will see, Matthew and Luke probably use it as a source for their work, so in that way it serves as a basis for the whole Synoptic tradition. If you have not listened to that first talk, you may like to hear it before embarking on this one.

We are turning next to the Gospel of Matthew, but not because it was necessarily the next one to be written. It is impossible to be very precise about the publication dates of the Gospels, and many commentators think that Matthew and Luke probably appeared around the same time. But although they both draw on Mark's Gospel, Matthew stays much closer to Mark than Luke does. About 90 per cent of Mark's verses find their way into Matthew, even though many of them are abbreviated, whereas Luke uses only about half of them. So as we are starting with Mark and building out from there, it makes sense to look next at the Gospel that most closely resembles it. Also Luke has much more material that does not appear in any other Gospel than Matthew does; so it is the most distinctive of the three and most naturally comes last in the sequence.

It is not surprising, therefore, that many of the key themes of Mark's Gospel are also found in Matthew. In fact all those that we considered in the last video are present, though Mark's idea of the messianic secret – the concealment of Jesus' identity during his ministry – is somewhat downplayed by Matthew. But some of Mark's themes are developed differently and more fully, which is to be expected given that Matthew's Gospel is much longer. For example, Matthew has a much richer and more varied understanding of Jesus' identity, and in discussing discipleship he is far more interested than is Mark in the keeping of the Jewish law. He also introduces the theme of the church and its communal life, which is present in Mark only at a very early stage of its development. But the thematic structure of the two Gospels is much the same.

This talk will follow the same format as the last one. After this prologue we will give the majority of the time to the major themes of the Gospel, and we will finish with some basic applications for individual Christians and for churches. For those watching on YouTube, I have put time stamps for each section and theme in the video description in case you want to focus on a particular topic.

### Key themes

So let us now turn to the key themes of Matthew's Gospel. Because the thematic structure of Mark and Matthew is much the same, we will look at these ideas in the same order as for Mark, with a couple of additions.

### *The eras of promise and fulfilment*

Like Mark, Matthew writes within what we previously called a 'historical framework'; that is to say, he locates the gospel events at a particular point in the story of God and God's people. This provides his readers with a basic context for understanding the significance of the story he is telling them.

So for Matthew, history is divided into two main periods. The first is an era of promise, and those promises are found in the Old Testament law and prophets. That is to say, like many Jews of his time, Matthew believes that Israel's scriptures point beyond themselves to something further that God is going to do, for his people and for the whole world. This future orientation is seen not only in the explicit promises of the Old Testament, but also in the many different, sometimes competing stories that it tells about God's dealings with Israel and the nations, stories that often point to an ending that has not happened yet. During this era of promise, divine revelation is incomplete – there is more to come – and it is restricted to the people of Israel.

At the transition between the first and second eras stands the figure of John the Baptist: the last prophet of the Old Testament age and the herald who declares that God is now about to do what he has promised. So the second period of history is an era of fulfilment, the eschatological (end-time) age in which the kingdom of heaven is now active. We will talk about the kingdom next; for now let us note that it is inaugurated in the ministry of Jesus and climactically in his death and resurrection. For Matthew Jesus is the unique focus of the scriptural promises, and the Old Testament points to him, both as a whole and in its individual parts.

This second era is then continued in the time of the church, in which the biblical promises are more fully realised, and extended to all nations. At this point Matthew goes well beyond Mark, who says very little about the ongoing life and mission of Jesus' disciples after his resurrection. Matthew's Gospel makes explicit what Mark almost certainly believed: that God's promises are still being fulfilled, in new ways, in his own day.

### *The kingdom of heaven*

The era of fulfilment in Matthew's Gospel is defined by the coming of what he calls 'the kingdom of heaven'. This concept is essentially the same as that of the kingdom of God in Mark; Matthew just prefers generally to use 'heaven', perhaps from a conservative Jewish desire to refer to God indirectly. But for him as for Mark, the kingdom is God's eschatological saving rule in history exercised through Jesus. John the Baptist announces its coming; he points to Jesus as its agent; and he calls Israel to repentance and righteousness in light of it. Then Jesus proclaims the kingdom; he demonstrates its coming in powerful works; and he teaches (much more than in Mark's Gospel) its God-given religious practice and ethic.

The kingdom of heaven is both present and future. In the present its coming is concealed except to those who have eyes to see it, and it also takes unexpected forms: it achieves surprising things, draws in surprising people and requires surprising responses. But at the same time it is powerfully at work, and it is strongly opposed by evil cosmic powers – the devil and demons – and by their human allies. Yet despite their antagonism it grows from small beginnings to become pervasive.

Matthew includes a much larger number of Jesus' parables than Mark does, and he even has a whole long chapter almost exclusively devoted to them. The parables both explain the nature of the kingdom and call for a particular response to it. They are intended to disclose these things to those who are willing to receive them and submit to God's reign, but they conceal them from those who are evil; in such people the parables do not produce understanding and goodness but merely harden them further. And they also make clear that those who reject the kingdom of heaven are liable to divine retribution.

We will defer discussion of the future dimension of the kingdom for when we look at Jesus' promised return. Suffice it to say here that in Matthew the judgment associated in Jewish expectation with the coming of the kingdom is held back until that future occasion.

### *The identity of Jesus*

Matthew's Gospel provides a very rich understanding of Jesus that goes well beyond Mark's at several points. Some of this is expressed in the various titles that the text ascribes to Jesus, but it can also be seen in the different ways in which he is said to fulfil Old Testament prophecy, as well as in his own words and powerful deeds. We are going to reference very briefly no fewer than twelve dimensions of Jesus' identity as presented by Matthew, but no doubt these could be configured in various ways and others added. We will start from the more ordinary and work up to the more exalted.

Firstly, then, Jesus is fully human. Despite the extraordinary things that he does and the remarkable things that are said about him in Matthew, there is no suggestion that his humanity is not real, that it is just an illusion cloaking something greater. Secondly, Jesus is a preacher and teacher with divine authority who proclaims the kingdom of heaven and reveals God's will, though his message is largely rejected by his contemporaries. This need not be more than a human function, and it recalls the ministry of some of the Old Testament prophets who brought God's word to Israel but were not heeded.

But thirdly, Jesus' own prophetic ministry goes well beyond that of most previous prophets; Matthew's Gospel presents him as the promised prophet like Moses. This prophet teaches a new law to Israel, based on the old but going beyond it, and he effects a new and greater exodus for God's people. In these functions too he bears God's authority, but this is greater even than that of Israel's greatest prophet, Moses.

That new exodus relates, fourthly, to Jesus' role as the saviour, who delivers his people not from human bondage but from their sins, supremely through his death. And in Matthew's Gospel another perspective is provided on Jesus' saving work by (fifthly) his function as the servant of the Lord described in the Old Testament book of Isaiah. This servant is gentle and humble; he works quietly and powerfully by the Spirit; he shows compassion to those who are devalued and extends God's salvation to the Gentiles; and he suffers and is rejected.

Sixthly, Jesus is also the Christ or Messiah and son of David, who fulfils Old Testament prophecy about a coming king of the Jews. In this role he rules over the kingdom of heaven on God's behalf; he acts as the representative of Israel, discharging its vocation and receiving its promises; he shepherds his people in the present by relieving their need; and he will exercise final judgment in the future. But his kingship also defies expectations, and like his work as saviour and servant, it is fulfilled through suffering. Extending this idea, seventhly, the Gospel presents him as the Lord, which means that universal, divine authority is given to him by God after his resurrection. Israel's Messiah is also Lord of the world.

The title 'son of God', eighthly, refers to Jesus' relationship to God. They have a unique knowledge of one another, such that Jesus uniquely reveals God and mediates his presence. Jesus has divine power over nature and authority to reinterpret the law of Moses. He is fully obedient to God and willingly accepts the unjust suffering that is required of him. And he replays (so to speak) the history of Israel, who was also called God's son, and does successfully what Israel was supposed to do but did not. The title 'son of man', ninthly, is if anything even more exalted: in this role Jesus is rejected on earth; he gives his life as a ransom; but he will come from heaven as the final and universal king and judge of the world.

Tenthly, in its nativity story, Matthew's Gospel also presents Jesus as Emmanuel, the one in whom God's presence and universal authority are fully embodied, and in whom they find

supreme expression for the sake of his people. Similarly it understands him (eleventhly) as the embodiment and expression of divine Wisdom, of the purpose of God in creation and redemption; he is the supreme locus of the divine presence, and others should learn from him. And since all that is true of him, the twelfth point is hardly surprising: that prayer, submission, reverence and even worship are properly offered to him.

Of course it is impossible to take all that in at one go; it would be hard enough to remember the twelve headings, let alone to understand everything that they mean. You may well also have noticed that many of the titles or dimensions overlap with each other, and that certain themes recur: Jesus' relation to God, his divine authority, his role in establishing God's kingdom, his saving work, his vocation to suffer, his exaltation to heaven, his coming as judge. But it is still worth separating out these different elements, to show ourselves how much wealth is to be mined from Matthew's portrait of Jesus, to reflect especially on those recurring themes, and to broaden our own vision of him. We will think a little more about that later.

#### *The death and resurrection of Jesus*

Much of what Matthew's Gospel reveals about Jesus' identity also sheds light on the meaning of his death and resurrection. But like Mark, he has little to say explicitly about their significance. He presents Jesus' death as a redemptive sacrifice for many; it secures divine forgiveness of sins; it defeats death; and it is the foundation on which the kingdom of heaven is grounded. In his resurrection, Jesus is vindicated against those who have opposed him and brought about his death. The era of fulfilment, the last or eschatological age of the world, which Jesus has launched in his ministry, has now entered a new and greater phase, and as we have seen, he is given universal, sovereign authority by God.

#### *The return of Jesus*

We saw earlier that the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel has both present and future dimensions: it has already come in the ministry of Jesus, but it is not yet complete. So Jesus will also return to consummate the kingdom, and he will do so by exercising God's eschatological and universal judgment. As in Mark, Jesus' predictions of his coming are linked to the fall of Jerusalem and its temple. That event is now almost certainly in the past, and it has not precipitated Jesus' return, so the Gospel acknowledges the possibility of some delay before that happens. But the end is still expected imminently; that is to say, it could come at any time; and if anything (maybe unlike Mark) Matthew wants to emphasise this.

Matthew's view of the final judgment is surprisingly strict regarding Jesus' disciples: it will be on the basis of their works. Calling Jesus 'Lord, Lord' is not enough; to share in the kingdom of heaven one must also do the will of God. But Matthew is surprisingly generous regarding those outside the community of disciples. For them that judgment will be based on their identification or otherwise with Jesus through his disciples: those who stand with them in their mission and their sufferings for him will receive the kingdom, while those who fail to do so will be excluded.

For the righteous, the final judgment will bring the reward of eternal life, glory and bliss in fellowship with God and with Jesus. For the wicked it will bring eternal condemnation.

#### *The Holy Spirit*

Matthew's limited teaching on the Holy Spirit is mainly taken over from Mark. John predicts that Jesus will baptise with the Spirit, and the Spirit comes upon him at his baptism to equip him for his mission. He casts out demons by the power of the Spirit, and to attribute this activity to Satan, as his opponents do, amounts to blasphemy against the Spirit, which is the unforgivable sin. The Spirit will also give the disciples words to say when they are persecuted for Jesus' sake. But because Matthew goes beyond Mark in including a story of

Jesus' birth, he is also able to affirm that the Spirit is the agent of Jesus' conception, enabling Mary to give birth to him while she is still a virgin.

### *Israel and the Gentiles*

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus' own mission is directed specifically to the Jews. God's Old Testament promises of renewal are given directly and primarily to Israel, and the kingdom of heaven that Jesus is bringing is first the fulfilment of those promises to Israel; the Jews are the original intended subjects of that kingdom. It includes even those within Israel who are of lowly status; indeed, it is especially for them, as they model the proper response to it. But Jesus also redefines 'Israel' to comprise not all those who are ethnically Jewish, but only those Jews who believe in and submit to him. As Messiah he is king of God's kingdom, so membership of it is necessarily defined in relation to him.

However, the leaders of Israel – whether the scribes and Pharisees or the temple authorities in Jerusalem – are portrayed by Matthew as hypocritical and resistant to the kingdom. They fail to recognise Jesus' identity – any of the distinctive roles that the Gospel ascribes to him – and they are openly hostile to him. In the end they prove to be incorrigibly evil by pursuing him to his death. But like Mark, Matthew sees them as representative of Israel, and eventually the people of Israel as a whole reject Jesus too, though of course not every individual Jew does so; in the Gospel all Jesus' disciples are Jews. The kingdom of heaven is promised to Israel, and they are invited to receive it, but collectively they refuse.

This rejection of Jesus and the kingdom has disastrous consequences for ethnic Israel, that group defined by physical descent from Abraham and by distinctively Jewish practice. They lose their exclusive privilege as God's people (we will see what that means in a minute), and God brings destruction on their nation and temple in the Jewish-Roman war of AD 66-70, putting an end to the sacrificial system. Many of them will be excluded from the kingdom. Their leaders, who have led them into this calamity, will forfeit their role and jurisdiction among God's people, and they too will be denied access to the kingdom.

But as a result of the Jews' losing their special privilege, the kingdom of heaven will now be extended to Gentiles (non-Jews) as well. In fact, during Jesus' own ministry some Gentiles have already exercised faith, and some of them have come to share in the blessings of the kingdom, as a kind of overflow of the good things being given to Israel; we might think of the centurion with his servant or the Canaanite woman and her daughter. But now, in the eschatological age following Jesus' resurrection, he sends out his followers to make disciples of *all* nations. We should note, however, that Matthew never suggests that the door is now closed on Jews' entering the kingdom; they too are included among the nations to whom the good news is taken.

### *Discipleship*

Matthew's Gospel draws heavily on Mark's teaching on discipleship but also develops it in various ways. Jesus is said here to reveal God to whom he chooses, picking up the idea we noted earlier that his teaching is accessible only to those with ears to hear it. He calls people authoritatively to follow him, and the proper response to him involves repentance – turning from sin towards God – and faith in him and in God, which includes adherence *to* them as well as belief and trust *in* them. Faith entails receiving the kingdom humbly, like a child.

Those who accept Jesus' call experience God as the Father who forgives their sins and cares for their needs. They receive the revelation brought by Jesus that in him the kingdom of heaven is coming; they share in its life and obtain rest for their souls. In response to God's grace through Jesus they are to live in conformity to his rule; we will see what that means in detail in a few moments.

Matthew stays close to Mark in his understanding of discipleship as following the way of Jesus, in both his teaching and his example. This process involves denial of self, risking one's life, self-sacrifice, humility and suffering persecution. The measure of greatness among Jesus' disciples is service – the first of them is the slave of all – and Matthew's Jesus affirms love of God and love of neighbour as the two greatest commandments.

Disciples must persevere in the face of their sufferings, which entails confessing Jesus as who the Gospel reveals him to be, even in the presence of those who are hostile to them. Their first priority must be seeking the kingdom of God and the righteous life that it demands, and this may involve some renunciation of their possessions and relationships. And because Jesus' return could happen at any time, they must also be in a state of constant readiness.

*Keeping the law.* But Matthew goes well beyond Mark in regard to the place of the Jewish law in the life of Jesus' disciples; indeed, arguably he goes in a different direction. On the one hand, we should note that Jesus regards the law as the will of God; he accepts his own obligations under it; and he asserts that his disciples are bound to keep all of it. In that statement there is no suggestion of any exceptions to the rule – even the least of the commandments is to be obeyed – so we have to suppose that Jewish religious practices are included, namely food laws and the Sabbath. Even more startling is Jesus' assertion that the scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat and that the disciples must therefore do whatever they say; although they are his enemies, their interpretation of the law is apparently binding too.

But on the other hand, the law of Moses is now authoritative for God's people only as it is expounded by Jesus, and only in light of the gospel and the coming kingdom of heaven. To be righteous is to obey the law in this sense. The repeated formula 'You have heard that it was said... 'but I say to you' neatly expresses this point. Jesus' frequent clashes with the scribes and Pharisees during his ministry hardly suggest his uncritical acceptance of their teachings, and he makes clear that Jewish and specifically Pharisaic tradition is after all to be rejected in so far as it conflicts with his own interpretation of God's commands.

We have seen already that in Matthew's Gospel final judgment for Jesus' disciples will be on the basis of their works, which we see now is their obedience to the law of God as construed by Jesus, and which is the condition of their entering the kingdom. This obedience constitutes a greater righteousness than that of the Pharisees, and we can understand that idea in various ways.

So Jesus' teaching *radicalises* the Jewish law, digging down into it to uncover the basic principles that underlie its specific precepts. His teaching *intensifies* the law, going beyond its often limited scope to demand even higher standards. And his teaching *transcends* the law, redefining it for the eschatological age as a response to the coming of God's kingdom.

Or to explain the point another way: for Matthew the law (and also the prophets) becomes an expression of the two great commands to love God and the neighbour, who now includes everyone, even the enemy; and of what is commonly called the Golden Rule, to treat others as one would wish to be treated by them. Or again, the law of Moses as interpreted by Jesus includes inward motives and attitudes as well as outward behaviour, and it prioritises ethical conduct over ritual purity and observance, though without rendering that observance redundant.

The goal of Jesus' commands is nothing less than perfection: he does not make this a condition of entry into the kingdom; he expects his disciples still to pray for the forgiveness of their sins; but he also does not present it as a mere ideal, an object for passive dreaming rather than active pursuit. By genuinely aspiring to it, disciples really can attain the righteousness greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees.

When we come to application at the end there will be something more to say on Matthew's very Jewish and law-centric understanding of discipleship. For now, though, a final note on this subject before we move on: the righteous deeds that together constitute this greater righteousness must not be done in order to be seen by other people. If disciples seek the praise of others, this will be the only reward that they get.

### *The church*

In our treatment of Mark's Gospel there was no section on the church, because (as was mentioned earlier) it presents the communal life of Jesus' disciples only at a very early stage of development. Matthew's Gospel has much more to say.

So for Matthew, Jesus' disciples are created by him into a new community. This 'church' (as it is called in two places) is heir to the Old Testament scriptures and to the promises of God that were made to Israel; it is for the church and not for ethnic Israel that those promises are now being fulfilled. It follows that the church is the eschatological Israel; that is to say, Israel for the end-times, Israel in this final period of history; this means it has inherited ethnic Israel's former role as the assembly of God, the gathering of his people. Thus it is also the true keeper or guardian of the law: unlike the Judaism of Matthew's day, it interprets the law correctly, and so it also produces the fruit of God's kingdom in lives of righteousness fit for the kingdom of heaven, the righteousness that surpasses that of scribes and Pharisees.

The church is grounded first on Peter – it is his authoritative teaching that defines the conditions on which people can enter the kingdom of heaven – and then on the eleven chosen disciples as a group. Matthew's view of the church is one of the most egalitarian in the New Testament: it is presented as a family of brothers who have equal status, with only one Father and only one teacher or instructor, namely Jesus. Until the last judgment it contains both good and bad people, those who do not exhibit the righteousness of the kingdom as well as those who do. And it exists in both local and cosmic dimensions: one of Matthew's two uses of the word 'church' refers to an individual congregation, and the other to the universal community of Jesus' disciples.

At the local level, authority is vested in the assembly of disciples. They are to develop their community life, which must include their forgiving each other. They are also to provide pastoral care to restore those of their number who are straying, and they are to exercise discipline against obstinate sinners by excluding them from fellowship; in this final task they are guided by Jesus' presence among them to make authoritative decisions. They receive the ministry of prophets, probably itinerant (travelling) prophets, who must be assessed not by their words or signs but by the quality of their lives; and probably they are also supported by local 'scribes', those who have particular insight into the nature and demands of the kingdom.

At the cosmic level, the church is opposed by the powers of death, but it will prevail against them. It suffers persecution from both Jews and Gentiles who are hostile to its message and its life, but it is sustained by Jesus to endure its sufferings. And from small beginnings it is destined for massive growth.

### *Mission*

Matthew's Gospel gives a definitive role in the mission of the church to the twelve chosen disciples of Jesus. Thus it presents them as prototypes of leadership and discipleship, although they are imperfect models. During his ministry Jesus shares his authority with them, and he sends them out to continue and extend his mission. He also promises them that at the eschatological renewal that will accompany his return, they will sit on thrones

judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Whatever that role entails exactly, it seems to be based on the authority given to them to declare the conditions on which people enter the kingdom.

We have seen that Mark's Gospel contains no general commissioning of the disciples for mission after Jesus' resurrection, perhaps because the work appears to be unfinished. Matthew makes good this omission: after the resurrection the mission of the Eleven is to make more disciples, not just from Israel but from all nations, baptising them and teaching them to obey Jesus' commands. The risen Jesus promises to be with them to enable them in this task to the end. And by closing the Gospel with this commission, Matthew intends to present it as paradigmatic for and applicable to the whole church; just as the Eleven are tasked with disciple-making, so are the disciples of Jesus collectively.

### Applications

So in closing, let us take a few minutes to consider some possible applications of Matthew's Gospel to individual Christians and the churches today.

Firstly, then, Matthew's Gospel enables us to locate ourselves on the timeline of God's dealings with his people. It tells us that we are living in the age of fulfilment, in which God's Old Testament promises are now being realised in the kingdom of heaven, and realised among us as the disciples of its king. On the one hand, this should raise our expectations of God's work in our midst, as he extends his saving rule over our individual and corporate lives. But on the other hand, it should remind us that the scriptural promises are fulfilled *only* in Christ, and that no Old Testament prophecy can properly be interpreted without reference to him and his redemptive work, both in history and now among us.

That insight should lead us, secondly, to explore the very rich Christology of Matthew's Gospel and to live in light of it. Every one of the dimensions of Jesus' identity that we mentioned – prophet, Messiah, son of God, Emmanuel – has implications for how we relate to him. In particular, they oblige us to recognise his greatness: that he is vastly more than a comfort blanket to make us feel loved, massively more than an AI assistant to tell us what to do, immensely more than a security system to keep us out of trouble. Thank God he can do all those things for us and much more, but our first task must be to orient ourselves in relation to him, not to demand that he first do so to us.

Our third and fourth points relate to discipleship. Matthew's Gospel is uncomfortably uncompromising in its teaching that disciples of Jesus will finally be judged on the basis of their works, and that confessing him as Lord must be accompanied by doing the will of God. On this matter Matthew may be at one extreme of the New Testament spectrum, and he needs to be counterbalanced or qualified by Paul and his teaching on justification by faith, but he is not alone among the authors in his emphasis on deeds. We certainly should not ignore or seriously downplay the demand of Matthew's Jesus for a greater righteousness than that of the Pharisees, or miss the various ways in which he expects us to fulfil it. In some sense at least, our access to the kingdom appears to depend upon it.

Specifically, Matthew's Gospel gives the Jewish law a much more prominent role in our discipleship than Mark does. Matthew takes over Mark's view that ethnic Israel has lost its national privilege as God's people; if anything he pronounces a more severe judgment upon it. But while he still portrays Jesus rejecting certain Pharisaic traditions, he also has him insisting that his followers are obliged to obey the whole law of Moses, albeit as interpreted by him. What that means in practice is not always easy to discern even from this Gospel, let alone when the different perspectives of other New Testament writers are factored in. But it at least challenges us to consider what role that law should have in our own discipleship.

Finally, the teaching of Matthew's Gospel on the church gives us resources for shaping our common life as God's people. For example, it reminds us to ground our relationships and practice on the apostles' teaching, which we have in our New Testament. It perhaps provides a greater endorsement than any other biblical writing for an egalitarian structure for the church, and for locating authority in the assembly of believers. It encourages us to practise mutual forgiveness, but also to exercise appropriate church discipline in the confidence of Jesus' presence with us. And it assures us that whatever sufferings we may experience for Christ, he will enable us to persevere, and that the church will prevail against the forces ranged against it.

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So that is our study on the Gospel of Matthew. Your comments will be very welcome. Next time we will move on to the Gospel of Luke.

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