

# PROVERBS



Randall Heskett

Scripture describes itself as a human testimony to divine revelation, and we can identify three idioms of revelation that function throughout the Old Testament, providing diverse arenas in which revelation can operate: Torah, Prophets, and Wisdom. While Torah and Prophets center on the uniqueness of God's revelation to Israel, wisdom provided a discourse in the ancient world by which all the nations could talk with one another. The compilers of the Old Testament incorporated ancient Israelite wisdom in their collection, including the book of Proverbs, in order to provide ways for Israel to take part in this more international, worldly, and human side of revelation. Proverbs partakes in cross-cultural dialog.

Many people read the book of Proverbs in the same way they would read Torah or Prophets, misconstruing its scriptural function. Understanding the form and function of wisdom literature, the role of ancient sages, how

their proverbs operated in the ancient world, and the manner in which they were later compiled within the greater corpus of Scripture helps to illumine the Proverbs as a biblical book.

### *Solomon as Designated Writer*

Most English translations, including the NRSV, open the Proverbs in 1:1 with the phrase: “The proverbs belonging to Solomon son of David, king of Israel” (cf. 10:1; 25:1), but many modern scholars misconstrue the meaning of Solomon’s role. For example, R. B. Y. Scott argues that much of the tradition in 1 Kings 3–11 (see 5:9-14; 10:1-10, 13, 23-24) connecting Solomon with the Proverbs grew out of what he calls “folk tales.” On similar historical grounds, James Crenshaw concludes, “Solomon and wisdom have nothing to do with each other.” While Scott and Crenshaw rightly show that the portrait of Solomon in 1 Kings and Proverbs cannot satisfy our modern appetite for

unearthing history and authorship, their historical criticisms overlook the theological function of designating Solomon as Proverb's writer. The biblical connections between Solomon and Israel's wisdom traditions can be rightly appreciated only when we understand how they belong to a particular, later context of *Scripture*. This literary and theological context shows how the Bible's wisdom traditions bear witness to God's revelation in history.

There is no ancient Hebrew word for author (the Bible only telling us that individuals "wrote" certain books), so M. Foucault's term "designated writer" may serve to describe the function of Solomon. Solomon is never called a prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures as Moses and David are, but the Targums use the term of him and thereby attest to the revelatory nature of the collection that bears his name. This is because Old Testament writers were given canonical status through the term "prophet" in the same manner that New Testament

writers embodied the witness of the “apostles.” Solomon became connected to wisdom within the context of an emerging Scripture in the same way that Moses became associated with Torah and David with the Psalms, each providing human testimony to revelation. Somehow biblical texts need to be set in time and space with a human voice, because it affects how one hears the words and demarcates the text as an arena in which revelation operates.

Since the book of Proverbs even describes Solomon in the third person, biblical wisdom literature belongs to Solomon’s legacy but does not need to have been written by him in the modern sense of authorship, where copyrights were created to protect against the printing press’s rapid and mass distribution of texts in an imposter’s name. Therefore, we can reconcile Solomon’s role in the book of Proverbs with how Lady Wisdom functions as a teacher, who speaks and instructs in the same book, much like the repetitive feminine

voice in the Song of Songs instructs young girls about sexuality: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem...” (Song of Songs 2:7; 3:5; 5:8, 9; 8:4).

### *A Feminine Voice among Others*

An array of images emerges in the book of Proverbs to portray the woman who accomplishes God’s ends, often through indirect means: feminine roles of wife, mother, preparer of meals, initiator of sexual activities, lover, harlot, adulteress, and wise woman. Biblical scholar Claudia Camp has inquired into the social milieu that might give rise to such images and roles and concludes that the life of the typical Israelite woman lies behind the presentation of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs. Based on the implied role of women in Proverbs and the conditions of society reflected in many of the sayings, Camp posits a “kingless sociological configuration of the postexilic era” when the family in some respects replaces the

monarchy as the defining element of society. Hence, the figure of Wisdom assumes the symbolic role of the king as mediator of God's revelation.

The Proverbs epitomize wisdom with feminine imagery by repeatedly and vividly highlighting Lady Wisdom's building of a house (9:1, 2; 14:1; 24:3-4). The image appears in all three sections of the book of Proverbs.

Wisdom has built her house. She has slaughtered her animals, she has mixed her wine, she has also set her table. She has sent out her servant-girls, she calls from the highest places in the town, "You that are simple, turn in here!" To those without sense she says, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed (Proverbs 9:2-5).

Personified as a woman, wisdom also addresses "man": "Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors.... For whoever finds me finds life" (Proverbs 8:34-35).

## *Wisdom as an Idiom of Revelation*

Wisdom functions as an idiom of revelation different from Torah and Prophets. When Israel returned to their land after the Babylonian exile, they needed to find a way to talk with their neighbors. They required international standards that did not betray their own unique religious norms. International wisdom offered itself as a “middle discourse,” a common ground upon which all nations could come together.

In order to talk to people of other nations, cultures, and religions, wisdom self-consciously brackets material that is peculiar to Israelite faith: the giving of the law at Sinai, mention of slavery in Egypt, the exodus, the covenant with God, and the election of Israel as God’s chosen people.

First Kings 10 is a showcase for Solomon’s wisdom. The wisdom of this king rivals that of other nations, even impressing the Queen of Sheba who

comes to test him with riddles. The Queen connects Solomon's wisdom and wisdom found elsewhere in the world, and places an authoritative stamp of approval on his wisdom. Her positive evaluation implies the importance of other nations legitimizing Israel's wisdom, despite their unawareness of Israel's cultic language.

The nations can legitimize Solomon's wisdom but not those things that have been self-consciously bracketed out of the Solomonic books. Both wisdom and Torah instruct us to deal righteously and justly with the poor and with each other, but Torah reminds Israel of the impetus behind this obligation in Israel's history with God: "You were once a slave in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 15:15; 16:12). Wisdom knows its limits. What is more, being wise does not guarantee obedience to the covenant. In 1 Kings 3:14, Solomon is told to obey Torah after he has received the gift of wisdom. In chapter 11, however, after the Queen of Sheba

has confirmed Solomon's great wisdom, we find that Solomon ended up failing to obey Torah.

Wisdom in the Proverbs borrows from other nations. The teachings of the Egyptian sage Amen-em-opet have been inserted into Proverbs (Proverbs 22:17–24:22). Proverbs 30:1 and 31:1 introduce proverbs that were written by non-Israelites. Wisdom, within Scripture, conforms to an international standard yet never betrays Israel's own liturgical and spiritual heritage.

Indeed, the book of Proverbs has been set up editorially so that wisdom may be heard as an idiom of *revelation* operating alongside Torah and Prophets. In Proverbs 2:6, we are told that “wisdom” as a revelatory discourse has a *divine* origin. In Proverbs 1:23-33, wisdom speaks as a prophet. While these verses do not exactly reduplicate Israelite prophecy, they do display clear resonances of prophetic speech. The Hebrew word for divine “oracle,”

*maśśā*<sup>2</sup>, introduces Proverbs 30:1-6. Then vv. 5-6 answer questions of a certain Agur son of Jakeh with quotations from Torah and Prophets: “Every word of God proves true...” (2 Samuel 22:31) and “The end of the matter is this: Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone” (Deuteronomy 6:2).

In each of these sample cases, editors have set Proverbs within canonical context, inviting the reader to hear this sort of wisdom alongside the Torah and the Prophets. The larger message is that the rest of Scripture confirms the potential of human wisdom and makes its truth manifest. On the basis of this sort of editorial work, the reader must conclude that the book of Proverbs is meant to be read as inspired Scripture alongside Torah and Prophets.

## *Wisdom and the Analogy of House Building*

Solomon's wisdom has been editorially arranged to reflect the analogy of house building within scripture. Thus, 1 Kings 3–11 deploys the analogy of building and maintaining a house as a test for Solomon's wisdom. In the same manner, biblical wisdom is often typified by the imagery of building a house (Proverbs 3:33; 7:10-17; 9:1-6, 13-18; 12:7; 14:1; 24:3-4). This leading metaphor found in international wisdom traditions (including those of Egypt and Mesopotamia) proves to be different from Torah and prophetic traditions but serves a purpose in identifying Solomon's wisdom as Scripture. While Torah and Prophets legitimize the biblical writer through prophetic call narratives, Solomon is legitimized by his house building. The house was the central arena of the ancient Near East and even in our own culture the word economics derives from the Greek words *oikos* ("house")

and *nomos* (“law” or “rule”). Hence, how one maintained his or her own house became a test for wisdom.

Therefore, much of 1 Kings 3–11 is organized around Solomon’s building efforts. First Kings 3:1 and 9:24, which speak of Solomon building a house for Pharaoh’s daughter, are editorially organized to lead into the story of the Queen of Sheba’s visit (cf. also 7:8).

First Kings 3:1 introduces the narrative about Solomon receiving wisdom from God at Gibeon: “Solomon made a marriage alliance with Pharaoh king of Egypt; he took Pharaoh’s daughter and brought her into the city of David, until he had finished building his own house and the house of the LORD and the wall around Jerusalem.”

Following the narratives about Solomon receiving wisdom and judging two prostitutes wisely and the description of Solomon’s administration, the section in 1 Kings 5:1–9:25 has been shaped around the theme of Solomon’s

building projects. Editors have included a series of notations about the completion of Solomon's own house (6:9, 14; 7:1). There follows a reference to his building of Pharaoh's daughter's house (7:8). Afterwards is found the narrative about the building of the temple, where the redactor notes its completion (9:1), indeed the completion of both the king's and the Lord's houses (9:10). First Kings 7:14 depicts Solomon's use of Hiram as builder of the temple with the same language that Exodus 36 uses to portray the wisdom that the Lord grants to Bezalel and Oholiab in order to build the tabernacle (Exodus 36:1).

It is not surprising that the main attribute of wisdom, which the Queen of Sheba sanctions, is his house building. First Kings 10:4-5 then serves as evidence that Solomon passes wisdom's test of building and maintaining his house wisely:

When the queen of Sheba had observed all the wisdom of Solomon, the house that he had built, the food

of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his valets, and his burnt offerings that he offered at the house of the LORD, there was no more spirit in her.

Within the greater context of Scripture, the book of Proverbs echoes this metaphor of house building when Lady Wisdom first builds her own house in Proverbs 9:1. The fact that a woman builds a house is found nowhere in Scripture but in the Proverbs. The seven pillars, which she has hewn, symbolize perfection. Proverbs also depicts the polarizations between the house of the wicked and the house of the righteous (3:33). In Proverbs 7:27, the wanton woman offers an invitation to her house but “her house is the way to Sheol” (7:27). The foolish woman sits at the door of her own house and serves as a snare for the passers by (9:13-18). House building represents the efforts of the wise and the unwise; yet, wisdom builds her house on understanding.

Proverbs 1–9, from the exilic or postexilic era, introduce an older body of Proverbs using 1 King’s metaphor of household organization. Proverbs 14:1 and 24:3 then serve as editorial additions that highlight the metaphor of house building within all three parts of the book. Just as 1 Kings 3–11 is editorially organized around Solomon’s house building, so is the biblical book of Proverbs. In 9:1, “wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.” In 14:1, “the wise woman builds her house.” In 24:3, “By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established.” The functions and analogy of the house appear throughout the book of Proverbs (3:33; 5:8, 10; 6:31; 7:6, 8, 27; 9:1, 14; 12:7; 14:1, 11; 15:6, 25; 17:1, 13; 19:14; 21:9, 12, 20; 24:3; 24:27; 25:17, 24; 27:10). The editorial intent is to synthesise the proverbs through placing this analogy of house building as a personification of wisdom in the beginning, middle and ending of the book while simulta-

neously bringing this book into canonical association with 1 Kings 3–11 and the other Solomonic books.

Therefore, we should not be surprised that Scripture-conscious editors use the analogy of house building to frame Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. Ecclesiastes 2:1-8 portrays Solomon as one who, among many other things, is a builder and maintainer of a house (2:4): “I made great works; I built houses and planted vineyards for myself.” His greatness as sage *par excellence* is then described in these terms: “So I became great and surpassed all who were before me in Jerusalem; also my wisdom remained with me” (2:9). Solomon’s actions make him wise and also correspond with 1 Kings 10:4-5, where the Queen of Sheba witnesses Solomon’s wisdom. This motif found in Ecclesiastes, ends the book by warning in 12:1-8 that no matter how great the craftsmanship in building a house, it is all vanity when we die. Hence, even the

wisdom house building has its limits apart from Torah.

In the Song of Songs, Solomon's palanquin is depicted in a manner quite reminiscent of the description of the building of the temple (wood of Lebanon, pillars of silver, gold and purple), yet within this context, it is "inlaid with love" (3:7-11). Solomon's wisdom encompasses his love. In the same fashion, Song of Songs 8:6-7 appears to enhance the motif of house building:

Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame. Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned.

Since the Song of Songs comments on house building in relation to love, perhaps the message conveyed here is that love stands at the top of wisdom's

hierarchy of needs in answer to Proverbs and Ecclesiastes.

## *The Form and Function of the Proverb*

Since the proverb (Hebrew: *māšāl*) seems to be the root form of wisdom, several studies have sought to identify its original form, function, and social setting in order to define its meaning. R.B.Y. Scott's work showed that the various generic forms within wisdom literature cannot be confined to one isolated social setting in the manner of the various genres of narrative and prophetic literature. Roland Murphy poignantly conveyed that wisdom has a tendency to float too and fro throughout the widest range of life settings. Therefore, James Crenshaw's distinction between family/clan, scribal, and court wisdom may not be easy to maintain, since, for example, a farmer could easily repeat sayings containing royal court imagery and a scribe could readily

make points using farm imagery. Wisdom is not class-conscious but is available to all people, social statuses, and religious traditions. Therefore, Murphy appears correct that we can only speculate as to the original social setting of the proverb, because wisdom is found throughout everyday discourse having several settings and functions.

Carole Fontaine, nevertheless, has saliently demonstrated how various proverbial folk sayings may have functioned within society. In five biblical examples, she shows how a person with less power has used proverbs or riddles to balance out power (Judges 8:2, 21; 1 Samuel 16:7; 24:13-14; and 1 Kings 20:11). Essentially, proverbs find their significant thrust in the admonitions to help, stand by, and preserve the dignity of the poor, the oppressed, the suffering, the hungry, the marginalized, and those without rights.

In Judges 8:2, the Ephraimites are angry with Gideon because he did not call upon them to accompany him and

his people when they went down to fight against the Midianites and “they upbraided him violently.” In this context, the controversy is over the booty which Ephraim wanted and so Gideon, who is in a place of lesser advantage, utters a proverb to gain some leverage: “Is not the gleaning of Ephraim *better* than the vintage of Abiezer?” Essentially his argument is that the results of Ephraim’s mop-up operations, though seemingly like what poor people glean in a field after a harvest is over, are actually superior to the fruits of the full-fledged military operations of Gideon’s family. The limited efforts of the strong are superior to the major efforts of the weak. This type of “better than” saying is common in Proverbs and Sirach: “Better is open rebuke than hidden love” (Proverbs 27:5).

A similar example occurs in a narrative where Gideon pursues two tribal chiefs of Midian, Zebah and Zalmunna, who have killed Gideon’s

brothers. Upon capture of the chiefs, Gideon commissions his firstborn son to kill them. The chiefs object, saying: “You come and kill us; for as the man is, so is his strength” (Judges 8:21). The lives of Zebah and Zalmunna are not saved through their appeal; they utter their proverb only to avoid the insult of a dishonorable death at the hands of a mere boy. Hence, they use a traditional saying to influence who kills them.

The context of the proverb (“*māšāl*”) in 1 Samuel 24:13 is the extended effort of King Saul, threatened by David’s fame, to kill David. In an episode of “comic relief,” Saul relieves himself in a cave where David and his men are hiding. David’s men feel that the Lord has provided them an opportunity to avenge David and kill Saul but David merely removes a corner from Saul’s cloak, which Saul had apparently taken off before responding to nature’s call (24:4). Since David understands the meaning of Saul’s being “the LORD’s anointed,” he intervenes and does not

let his men kill the king (although perhaps David's cutting off the corner of Saul's cloak signifies the LORD's rejection of Saul; cf. 1 Samuel 15:27-28). Since Saul has tried to kill David, one could easily anticipate David's slaying of Saul as an act of self defense, yet David spares him. David follows him outside, does obeisance, and assures him that this act of mercy proves that he has never intended to kill him. Because David has made himself vulnerable and unsafe, he disarms Saul. He then cites a proverb to lend credence to his actions: "Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness" followed by the assurance "but my hand shall not be against you" (24:13). The phrases about "wickedness" are Saul's own projections onto David, which David argues do not stick: "A wicked nature produces wicked acts, so if I were wicked as you postulate, I would have killed you when you were in the cave; since I did not do this wicked thing, I must not be wicked." David's phrase "as the old

*māšāl* says” emphasizes that Saul shares David’s underlying worldview, as proves to be the case since Saul acknowledges to David: “you are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil.” The use of the *māšāl* is successful here because David, who is in the inferior position, forces Saul to reassess the situation according to the logic of wisdom. David must not be wicked as Saul supposes (but Saul is implicitly wicked).

Although Murphy has shown the impossibility of isolating a pure original oral-performance of wisdom, his student, Carole Fontaine, has demonstrated one way where wisdom functions in its proverbial form. Wisdom evokes self-observation, inner-perception, in those listeners who are wise enough to assess themselves. This is why Claus Westermann claims that “the person uttering the proverb never appeals to a position of authority. Rather he stands on the same level as the one listening;

he addresses the listener as a fellow human being who has come of age.” Wisdom and knowledge is power.

As cultures developed, wisdom infused many evolving genres. Daniel 1:4 describes men who were “versed in every branch of wisdom, endowed with knowledge and insight, and competent to serve in the king’s palace; they were to be taught the literature and language of the Chaldeans.” The phrase “every branch of wisdom” speaks of the intellectual traditions of the ancient world: languages, literature, healing, counseling, dream interpretation, flora and fauna, astronomy, commerce, farming and irrigation, religion and spirituality. Wisdom broadened beyond the standard proverb into an entire gamut of traditions and disciplines. Israel’s ancient wisdom traditions found a trajectory extending to didactic wisdom poetry. Wisdom stories and parables emerged.

A great teacher of wisdom, Jesus of Nazareth employed proverbs, didactic

poetry, and parables. He drew on various proverbs—about one's place at the table, the friend at midnight, the unfruitful fig tree—transforming them to fit a more developed wisdom genre: the parable. The so-called Q document, from which Matthew and Luke borrow, did not include explicit descriptions of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, because it operated within a wisdom framework, emphasizing Jesus's functions as a wise man, especially in his teaching and healing.

Having grown up around wisdom traditions, much of Jesus's preaching naturally followed the form of didactic wisdom. Popular proverbs functioned within the circles of common people with whom he associated. He exhibited such wisdom as early as his twelfth year, when he amazed the leaders of his day in the temple. Most profoundly, his parable of the Good Samaritan epitomized the heart of wisdom by showing that being a good neighbor extends beyond all cultural and religious

bounds, even to the most despised religion of his day. Samaritan religion was viewed by his contemporaries in a manner perhaps similar to how many westerners today think of Islam.

The sapiential traditions provide an all-encompassing discourse, describing the cosmos, the universe, the world, the whole. They include diversity that extends to the least of all people instead of pushing away that which is culturally and religiously different. Such wisdom can rectify the diminishing returns of modernity through teaching limits. It can expose the foolishness of a narrow focus that disregards the whole. It can reveal the inadequacies of trying to make methods function beyond their thresholds. Since modern scholarship has failed to consider the whole, refused to acknowledge limits, and excluded the masses from participating in its dialog, we now live in a culture that needs to be redirected by wisdom.

Just as wisdom developed in the ancient world from proverbial wisdom

to didactic wisdom, wisdom today cannot be suspended in its ancient forms but must infuse modern methods, sciences, arts, and even spiritual formation. Since the ancient traditions speak both of being wise and of wisdom as an entity in and of itself—wisdom as both abstract and objectified—wisdom holds a special place in learning and knowing. Somehow we lost the power of wisdom when modernity replaced it with the “Wissenschaft” of science, philosophy, and other modern disciplines. We failed to allow wisdom and education to work hand in hand. Today we need to find creative ways to reapply ancient wisdom traditions in order to rediscover how new wisdom forms can function in ways that inculcate wholeness. Perhaps a Kalenjin proverb from Kenya hits the nail on the head: “We add wisdom to knowledge.”

## *The Organization of the Book of Proverbs*

The biblical book of Proverbs contains several collections of proverbs, two-line sayings, poems, and instructions. It can be outlined as follows:

- I. Prologue (1-9)
  - A. Purpose (1:1-7)
  - B. Superiority of Lady Wisdom over Mistress Folly (1:8-9:18)
- II. Proverbs of Solomon (10:1-22:16)
- III. Thirty Sayings of the Wise (22:17-24:22)
- IV. Additional Sayings of the Wise (24:23-34)
- V. Hezekiah's Collection of Proverbs (25-29)
- VI. Words of Agur (30)
- VII. Words of Lemuel (31:1-9)
- VIII. The Ideal Wife (31:10-31)

While most of the chapters and sections have titles or superscriptions, there is no title for the concluding poem in 31:10-31. While an earlier title in Proverbs 10:1 opens with "The proverbs

of Solomon,” Proverbs 1:1 comprises a later-written secondary title that begins the entire collection like this: “The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel.” Proverbs 22:17 opens an entire collection, borrowed from the Egyptian Wisdom of Amenemopet (22:17–24:22), using the title “The words of the wise.” The striking words of 25:1 tell us that the following proverbs come from the hands of Hezekiah’s officials. Then we have the words of Agur (ch. 30) and Lemuel (31:1-9), with the section of “The Ideal Wife” closing the collection (31:10-31).

Within the Hebrew canonical order of Proverbs, then Ruth, and then Song of Songs, Proverbs 31 sets a precedent for what follows. The book of Ruth, like Proverbs 31, describes the perfect wife: Ruth lives out the directives of this chapter by rising up early and working in the fields, and she makes her husband known in the city gates. She speaks words of kindness. Moreover, the Song of Songs follows this pattern by in-

structing young women who are probably from the nobility about love and the politics of desire.

### *Conclusion*

Throughout the Solomonic books, and most specifically the Proverbs, wisdom functions as a middle discourse among the nations to provide a way for Israel to dialog with her neighbors, while self-consciously bracketing out her own cultic material. This wisdom provides a human way of speaking about life and the wholeness of the human journey. Wisdom can borrow materials from other nations and put it into Scripture (Proverbs 22:17–24:22; 30:1; 31:1), but it never betrays Israel's peculiar language of a history with God as expressed in the Torah and Prophets. That is because the wisdom in the book of Proverbs weaves together what all nations, peoples and religions have in common. Moreover, biblical wisdom never distinguishes itself as non-revela-

tory, as though it were based on human experience. In its scriptural portrayal, it works alongside Torah and Prophets as a category of revelation. In the contemporary wisdom dialogue, we can neither be limited by the naïveté of pre-modern exegesis, which accepts the biblical portrait of Solomon uncritically as history, nor by the myopic leanings of modernity, which would insist that “Solomon and wisdom have nothing to do with each other.” As people who have drunk from the wells of modernity, we need to draw from what we know and begin to understand what it means to read the biblical book of Proverbs within Wisdom Literature and its placement within Jewish and Christian Scripture.



*Dr. Randall Heskett holds advanced degrees from Yale University and the University of Toronto. He is the author of Messianism within the Scriptural Scroll of Isaiah and editor of the forthcoming volume, The Bible as a Human Witness to Divine Revelation. He and his wife Kim, the love of his life, live in Denver, Colorado. He is the founding President of the California Wholeness Institute, which helps people to integrate the academic, personal, and professional worlds.*

Cover image depicting “Solomon the Wise” as recipient of the revelation of Proverbs from the 1683 Louvain Bible, *La Sainte Bible, contenant le Vieil et Nouveav Testament*, courtesy of the Pitts Theology Library, Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

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