

The Rise of La Luz del Mundo in Texas

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ABSTRACT: La Luz del Mundo, a large and relatively new Christian denomination, originated in Mexico in 1926 even as the Roman Catholic religious hegemony was being challenged by a spectrum of Protestant and post-Protestant groups. The new church has complex roots, one being the still relatively new Pentecostal movement, which spread from Los Angeles into Mexico early in the twentieth century. La Luz del Mundo was founded by a young Mexican visionary who emerged from an initial contact with God with a unique mission. The Apostle Aarón began to develop his church, La Luz del Mundo (The Light of the World), in Guadalajara. It followed a unique version of Arian Christianity, which recognized the one God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ, and additionally restored the office of Apostle to its primary role in church leadership. In 1960, La Luz del Mundo entered Texas, the state where Pentecostalism was receiving its greatest support. In its 60 years of life thereafter, the church has experienced a steady increase in membership year-by-year. Its success in the state has been capped by the construction of a headquarters temple in Houston.

KEYWORDS: La Luz del Mundo, Pentecostalism, Pentecostalism in Texas, Religion in Texas, Houston La Luz del Mundo Temple.

Note: This article has emerged from a larger project devoted to the production of a history of Pentecostalism in Texas. To date, as this project has proceeded, a series of papers and one monograph have appeared (Melton 2015, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Unreferenced details about La Luz del Mundo in Texas come from interviews and observations made during my fieldwork there in 2019 and 2020.

La Luz del Mundo and Early Pentecostalism

In 2020, members of La Luz del Mundo, a large relatively new Christian denomination that originated in Mexico (Dormady 2011; Greenway 1973;

Ramírez 2015; Fortuny 1995; Fortuny 2002) celebrate the 60th anniversary of the introduction of their church to the State of Texas. La Luz del Mundo (officially Iglesia del Dios Vivo, Columna y Apoyo de la Verdad, La Luz del Mundo, or in English, Church of the Living God, Pillar and Ground of the Truth, The Light of the World) traces its beginnings to the ministry of one Eusebio Joaquín González (1896–1964), a soldier serving in the Mexican Army in the mid-1920s. His life would be radically changed in the 1920s when he would, over a relatively short period, move from his Catholic upbringing into a totally new role as a religious leader. Along the way, he would spend a brief time with two itinerant preachers who introduced him to a post-Protestant version of the Christian gospel, while simultaneously providing a context in which he would experience his own direct encounter with God and receive the new revelation that led him to found La Luz del Mundo.

One stream of history leading to the rise of La Luz del Mundo takes one back to 1905 and the relocation of Pentecostal founder Charles Fox Parham (1873–1929), to Texas. Parham’s message had initially targeted Holiness believers to whom he identified a new goal in Christian life—the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Holiness people saw their life as a progressive movement that began with their faith in Jesus Christ, the new birth, which would be followed at some later date by a second work of grace, sanctification, in which the root of sin would be removed and they would be made perfect in love (sanctified), and thus fit to enter into the presence of God after death. Parham suggested a third stage in that progression, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which would empower sanctified Christians to live a full Christian life on earth. He also suggested that the reception of the baptism of the Holy Spirit was evidenced by the believer speaking in an unknown tongue.

The new Pentecostal message was initially proclaimed in Texas among a few people in Orchard, not far from Houston, but then experienced a significant response during a series of meetings in Houston during the summer of 1905. Within a few months, it would spread not only through the city but to a host of surrounding communities, where pioneering Pentecostal congregations were established by Parham’s band of youthful co-workers (Goff 1989). Not only Anglos, but African Americans and Mexican Americans would be drawn to the new movement. Early in 1906, an African American minister, William J. Seymour (1870–1922), who had accepted the Pentecostal message, though he had yet to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit himself, would travel from Houston to

assume leadership over a small group of believers in Los Angeles, Texas Pentecostalism's first expansion outside of the state (Espinosa 2014; Martin 1999; Robeck 2006).

In Los Angeles, in the spring, a revival would break out within the African American community at a mission Seymour had established on Azusa Street. The Mission would draw many to the city to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and Los Angeles would copy and then surpass Houston as a disseminating point for what would quickly become a national and then global movement.

Just as the movement in Texas attracted Mexican Americans, it would find support in the Spanish-speaking community in southern California, and as news of what was happening at Azusa spread internationally, it would draw Mexicans to Los Angeles to experience the revival directly. While the phase of the revival centered on the original Azusa mission died out in 1909, by that time a handful of Pentecostals congregations had been established in the city, and the Pentecostal scene remained vital in Los Angeles in succeeding years.

Arriving in the city in 1912 from Mexico was Mrs. Romana (Romanita) de Valenzuela, a member of the Congregationalist church, who would stay in Los Angeles for over a year during which she made her initial firsthand contact with the faith. Her sojourn just happened to coincide with the second major controversy to break out within the young movement, around the proclamation of the Oneness message. Oneness, or Jesus Only Pentecostalism, was so designated for its practice of baptism in the "name of Jesus," and its discarding the more traditional formula of baptizing in the name of the "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (Reed 2008). Romanita would return to her Mexican hometown of Villa Aldama, Chihuahua, in 1914, as a fervent Pentecostal. Her enthusiasm would lead to the founding of the first known Apostolic Faith congregation in Mexico. Over the next decade, additional Pentecostal churches were formed that were aligned with the non-trinitarian form of the faith that had emerged in Los Angeles during Valenzuela's residency in the city.

By the mid-1920s, a dozen or more of loosely affiliated Oneness Pentecostal churches using the name Apostolic Church of Faith in Jesus Christ could be found across Northern Mexico. After a decade of relatively steady growth, however, beginning in 1924, their fellowship was disturbed, not by new theological controversy, but by the appearance of two new unusual charismatic leaders, Antonio Muñoz (d. 1935) and Francisco Flores, who had taken the

names Saulo and Silas respectively. Bearded and unwashed, they were quickly identified with the biblical John the Baptist and other prophets, and like them they preached a message of repentance and faith. They called their audiences to denounce their old religion (i.e., Roman Catholicism) and material possessions, and to be rebaptized in the “name of Jesus.” They assumed some additional unique authority from “special divine revelations,” which they had received through their own prophecies, dreams and visions, rather than from any particular study they had made of the Bible—still at the time a rather unknown and unread text for the average Mexican (Holland 1995; Ramírez 2015, 42–5).

A movement emerged around Saulo and Silas as their preaching attracted a following while disrupting the normal life of the Apostolic churches in the decade following their appearance. Their work was even more disruptive as the Apostolic Faith churches were simultaneously undergoing some internal organizational dissention, which resulted in several Apostolic leaders and churches separating and affiliating with the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual (Spiritual Christian Church) based in Tampico, Tamaulipas. This new church had been founded by Scotch-Irish missionary Joseph Stewart (1871–1926) in 1924. Stewart had been a Christian and Missionary Alliance missionary who had made his way to Los Angeles, where he absorbed Oneness teachings. Stewart’s movement in Mexico attracted many former participants of the Apostolic Faith churches. Saulo and Silas also affiliated with the Iglesia Cristiana Espiritual (Ramírez 2015, 74–5).

Among those attracted to Saulo and Silas was the young soldier Eusebio Joaquín González. He resigned from the army, and eventually assumed duties as a domestic servant for the preachers. He appears to have dutifully attended to his tasks while listening to the prophets’ teachings. His encounter with the prophetic pair would, however, have different results in the young man’s life from that of the average believer. After being with Saulo and Silas only a short time, Eusebio experienced a divine intervention into his life. On April 6, 1926, he heard God speaking to him calling him to his own particular life’s work, “Your name is Aarón, and I will make it known around all the world, and it will be a blessing” (for more details, see Introvigne, this issue of *The Journal of CESNUR*). In later years, according to those who knew him, Eusebio would state that he mostly learned from his experience with Saulo and Silas and their antinomian lifestyle what *not* to do, and how their kind of disruptive behavior should be avoided by church leaders.

From this direct contact with God, Eusebio Joaquín González emerged as the Apostle Aarón, and almost immediately launched his mission to restoring the doctrine, norms, principles, and sacred traits of the early Christian Church even as he began to preach the message of Jesus Christ to all who would listen. He made his way by foot to Guadalajara, some distance south, finally arriving in December. His entrance into the city happened to coincide with a great celebration, the feast Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, one of the most important for Mexican Catholics (December 12), commemorating the reputed apparition of the Blessed Virgin to a Mexican peasant in 1531. The Apostle condemned the celebration in no uncertain terms. He was concerned that Guadalajara would celebrate

the greatest hoax that our country has received in believing that there exists in the heavens a woman of flesh and blood. And that that woman showed herself on the cloak of an Indian so that the image of the beast would be adored on that date of great meaning to humanity (Ramírez 2015, 77).

At the same time, while he was saddened by the city's devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe, he was more than comforted by God's again speaking to him and offering further word of direction, "I want you to preach the Gospel in this city, because I have a great people that will serve me, and this will be proof that I sent you; I will be with you" (Ramírez 2015, 77). Henceforth, Guadalajara would become the center of his life's work to be embodied in La Luz del Mundo.

He began work to grow a church community in Guadalajara and from there extend that same church to the other major cities around the country. As Patricia Fortuny has pointed out, he found strong support among the poorer classes, especially those most negatively affected by the larger socio-economic forces that weighed heavily upon them—the Cristero War, America's Great Depression, and World War II (Fortuny 2002). On the more positive side, the new church profited from some of the overflow of the growing Pentecostal movement in California and Texas, as Mexican converts enjoyed the relatively open border then existing between Mexico and the United States. In Guadalajara especially, the church proved a spirited challenge to Roman Catholicism, which had to some extent grown lazy in attending to the needs of local residents over whom they had enjoyed a virtual monopoly in matters of the sacred.

As the church took shape, much of the new Pentecostalism and its Holiness roots survived. La Luz del Mundo took on the appearance of a conservative Bible-

oriented Protestant church. It affirmed the authority of the Scriptures, salvation in Christ, water baptism, Spirit baptism, and hope in Christ's second coming. Women were to dress conservatively with long dresses, wear no make-up or jeweled adornments, and refrain from cutting their hair. Men had few regulations concerning their appearance, except to keep their hair neatly trimmed. Not as common, at least among Christian groups, the sexes were segregated during worship, the women to one side and the men to the other. Also, common to the time, as an ordained ministry developed, women were excluded from serving as pastors, though, of course, women were invited into a spectrum of non-ordained ministries.

Growth over the first decades of the church's life was steady, if not spectacular. The work into the middle of the century bore visible fruit when in the 1950s the Apostle Aarón was able to purchase some 14 acres of land on the eastern edge of Guadalajara where the church's headquarters would be established. Around the headquarters church members would move into a utopian-like setting, an intentional community where they would construct their own homes in what was designated the "Beautiful Province" (Hermosa Provincia). Here, church leaders could gather to strategize on the international expansion of the church even as they watched the blossoming of the fruits of their labors as the Hermosa Provincia emerged. As the church developed, wherever the concentration of members allowed, additional intentional communities have been founded following the pattern of the initial Hermosa Provincia.

Twenty-five years after the church's founding (1959), it had spread to more than 20 of Mexico's 31 states and made its initial efforts to reach the international community. Meanwhile, along the country's northern border, it was beginning to interact with the emerging American Pentecostal movement that was flourishing along the Rio Grande Valley from Brownsville to El Paso on both sides of the river. Pentecostalism had emerged as a restorationist movement, restoring the charismatic gifts of the Spirit, especially speaking in unknown tongues, to a central place in Christianity. Oneness Pentecostalism had gone further, and attempted to restore the central affirmation of the One God and solve at least one problem of fifth century Christians by elevating Jesus rather than subordinating him. Instead of privileging God the Father, as had previous Oneness theologians, the Pentecostals Oneness thinkers focused their thinking and piety on the Second Person of the Trinity and proclaimed that God's name was Jesus (Reed 2008).

While participating in this restorationist agenda, La Luz del Mundo made two important adjustments. First, the church restored not just the Apostolic Faith in its teachings and practices, but also the apostolic office. The Apostle Aarón and his successors in office are seen as having a special relationship with God and as guiding the church from the knowledge that they alone have received from God the Father and Jesus Christ. The Apostle Aarón and his successors Samuel (1937–2014) and Naasón (b. 1969), are by no means objects of worship, but they have been assigned the highest status in the community and shown respect and deference comparable to that given the original twelve apostles. The great esteem in which the Apostles are held is made visible in each local church, where some prominent acknowledgement of the Apostles as the columns that uphold the church is usually integrated into the front of the main sanctuary. In Texas, at the lead church in Houston, constructed during the tenure of the second Apostle Samuel, a monument of 14 columns was erected—12 for the original apostles and two for the Apostle Samuel and his predecessor.



Figure 1. The monument of apostolic columns, La Luz del Mundo Temple, Houston.

Second, rather than accepting the Oneness perspective of the “Jesus Only” Pentecostals, the Apostle Aarón proposed a perspective that was quite similar to the teachings of Arius (256?–336), the fourth century bishop and theologian whose perspective challenged the emerging trinitarian faith defended by Bishop Athanasius (297?–373), and whose solution to the problem of Christ’s status almost carried the day at the Council of Nicaea before being finally rejected.

Arius and his followers feared that the Trinity veered into tritheism, the worship of three gods. They emphasized God the Father’s supremacy and uniqueness, and reasoned that the Father’s divinity excluded the Son, who was slightly less than the Father in status. Christ shared in the Father’s divinity, but in a derivative sense. This distinction meant that Christ was affirmed as the Son of God and Savior, but not as God in the most complete sense.

In its Statement of Faith, La Luz del Mundo affirms belief in “the existence of God, one and universal, according to what is established in the 1st book of Kings 8:23” in “Jesus Christ, Son of God and Savior of the world, according to the book of Acts 8:37: ‘I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.’” The church’s understanding of the unique nature of Jesus leads it to affirm its belief “that the death of Jesus Christ vindicates man before God, and because of that sacrifice humankind is acceptable and pleasant before God.” These affirmations, which point to the church’s understanding of Christ’s death, have set La Luz del Mundo apart not only from Catholicism, but from both two main branches of Pentecostalism. As the church has grown, its particular theological position has become the object of some exceedingly harsh criticism by its religious competitors.

Entrance into Texas

By 1960, Apostle Aarón was ready to bring his restoration program into what had become Pentecostalism’s greatest area of expansion in the United States—Texas. Previously, Pentecostalism, led by the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the Assemblies of God, and the United Pentecostal Church (UPC), had found its first breakout moments in the state and there, decade by decade, had enjoyed its greatest membership growth in the country. The Texas District (prior to its division into four parts in 1956) was the largest in COGIC, and the same could be said of the Assemblies of God and the UPC.

Apostle Aarón began the 1960s with a visit to Matamoros, a city in Mexico's Tamaulipas state, which sits just across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas. This visit was not, of course, his first to the city. He had originally traveled there in 1934, very early in his apostolic career. On this first visit, he would run into some hostility during his initial attempts to preach to the residents, and would find support from an unexpected quarter, an Anglo preacher, whom he came to know only as Mr. Ball. Ball stood up for him and defended the Apostle when a mob of angry Catholics threatened him for delivering a message quite different from what they believed to be true Christianity. The Apostle unfortunately did not get to know his defender, as each went his separate way when the crowd was dispersed.

It was an intriguing possibility that the Apostle's benefactor might be none other than Henry C. Ball (1896–1989), who was in 1934 serving as the superintendent of the Assemblies of God Mexican work, which was still in its first stages of extending its presence from Texas into Mexico. Ball, who had led the work for more than two decades, would remain in charge of the Assemblies Spanish language work until 1939 when he was succeeded by Demetrio Bazan (1900–1976). However, checking Ball's 1934 schedule, and the oral account of events in 1960, renders that being the case most unlikely.

In fact, during his 1960 visit, the Apostle inquired about the man who had defended him twenty-five years earlier, and learned that Ball was now residing in St. Benito, a town some thirty miles north of Brownsville. He made his way to Ball's residence, confirmed he was the same Ball of the 1934 incident, and during a joyful reunion was able to thank him for his action years previously. In return, Ball was able to point him to at least one person who might be open to receiving the apostle's message. Following their visit, Apostle Aarón and his entourage moved on to San Antonio where they hoped to find one Jesús Lopez, a local preacher whom Ball had suggested he contact. They also sought out two women—Dolores García and Urbana Suárez—whose names had been received from other sources. With the assistance of these three people, La Luz del Mundo would plant its first congregation in the state.

From the initial preaching of the Apostle and the several assisting preachers who accompanied him on the San Antonio trip, a small congregation was formed. On March 20, 1960, Jesús Lopez, Dolores García, Urbana Suárez, and eight additional adults received baptism into La Luz del Mundo. The church's

beginning in Texas is dated from this seemingly humble event. San Antonio had become Mexican America's most important center in Texas, and the congregation would grow steadily, emerging as the center from which the Church would initially expand across the state.



Figure 2. La Luz del Mundo San Antonio Temple.

In 1965, several preachers from San Antonio would bring the message to Houston, where they operated out of a small house for several years before purchasing land on Bostic Street in northeast Houston, where congregants erected a small church building in which they were able to incorporate the unique sanctuary structures that identify La Luz del Mundo's worship centers around the world (Wyatt 2011).

The work in Houston would begin in the wake of a "watershed" event for the church internationally, the death of Apostle Aarón in 1964, and the calling of his son Samuel Joaquín Flores as his successor. I use the term "watershed" in place of another common term, "crisis," often used in discussing the death of a new religion's founder. In the past, many assumed that the death of a new religion's founder presented a crisis or a trauma threatening the very existence of a new

religion. This assumption, based on a miniscule evidential base, was among the several truisms about new religious movements discarded as new religions studies emerged in the 1970s and 1980 (Nelson 1969; Melton 1985; Robbins 1988; Miller 1991).

The death of the founder is, of course, an important event, which members suffer as a loss, and following which they pause to mourn, before continuing the mission to which the founder has pointed them. Critics, often denigrating first generation religious movements as merely personality cults built around the founders, and hence less than serious religions, assumed that a founder's death took the heart of the religion from it. However, the overwhelming majority of new religions are serious spiritual endeavors, and the death of the one who initially brought to them their faith generally has the effect of spurring them to greater devotion rather than taking their faith from them. Certainly, that was the case of La Luz del Mundo, which in the years after the death of Apostle Aarón, assumed a sharp upward trajectory. In Texas, from the initial congregation in San Antonio, the church spread across the state. Today it is one of the largest Mexican American denominations operating in the state, with more than 80 congregations. Meanwhile in Mexico it was expanding to include more than a million members and emerge as the second largest church in the country.

Progress of La Luz del Mundo in Texas

The move to Houston in 1965 would also prove auspicious for the church. Houston is the largest city in Texas, and would soon replace San Antonio as the base of La Luz del Mundo in the region. A congregation would initially meet at facilities on Hage Street, which it soon outgrew. Members then purchased land on Bostic Street where another church had previously met. That building would be demolished in the 1990s to make way for a new building. That transition would become visible at the end of the 1990s when the land was readied for the construction of the church's new temple, the large building at least partially inspired by St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, with its accompanying mansion-like minister's residence. The building of the temple, principally erected by church members, was begun in 2000 and completed in 2005 (Vara 2005). The church was especially proud of the interior of the temple, whose ornate decorations were both designed and installed by church members.

Meanwhile, as the plans for the new temple were being drawn up and construction begun, other members were spreading out around Houston to launch congregations in places such as Conroe, Freeport, Pasadena (Texas), Victoria, Port Arthur, and beyond. In Houston proper, following the inauguration of the current Bostic temple, the older building on Hage Street sat empty. That site is currently (2020) being renovated to resume prayers again but reflecting the growth of the church among Houstonians of other than Mexican heritage, the services will all be conducted in English (La Luz del Mundo now has six temples across the country where prayers are offered exclusively in English.) Multilingual Pastor Bigvai Estrada leads the Hage temple.

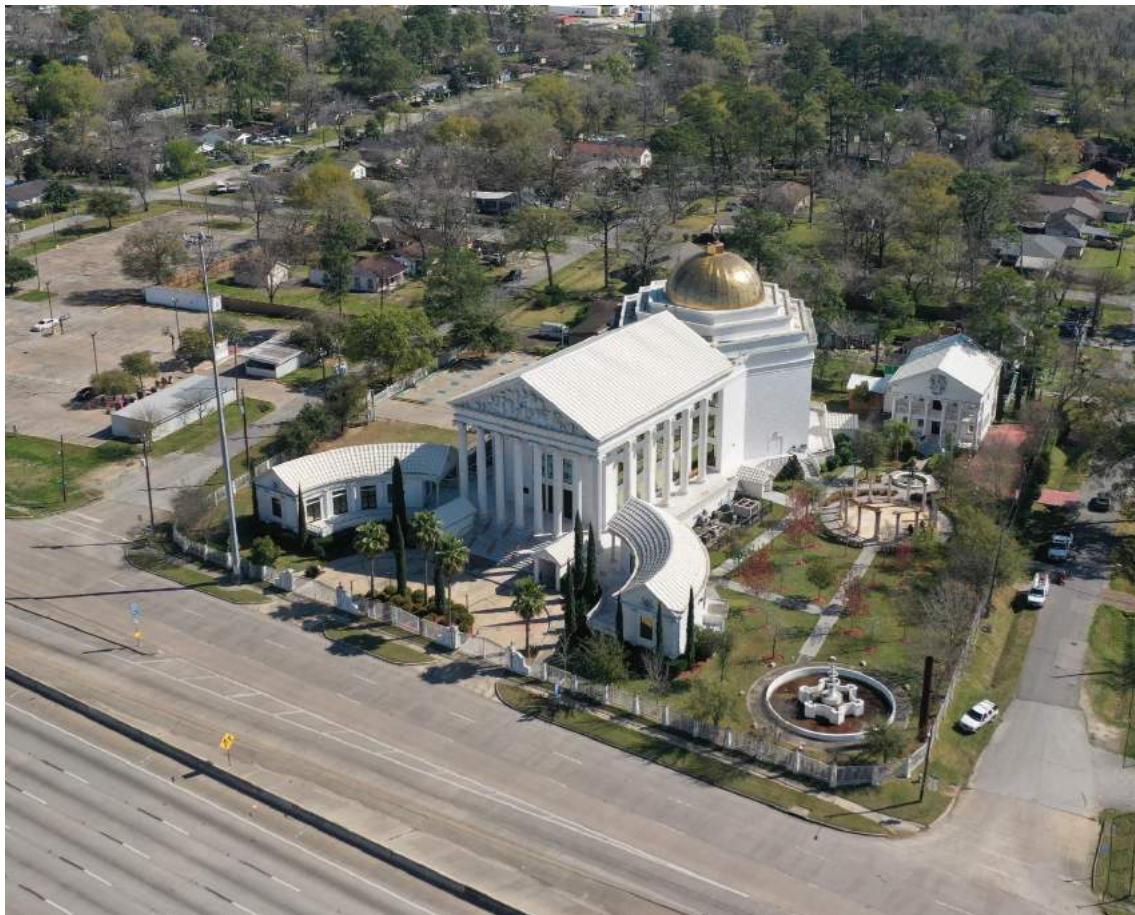


Figure 3. La Luz del Mundo Temple, Houston, Texas.

When the new Bostic Street temple opened in 2005, the Apostle Samuel officiated. The congregation had previously been served by several successive pastors, and the one serving the church in 2000 was Benjamin Joaquín, the founder's grandson.

As La Luz del Mundo became visible in the 1970s, critics representing its religious competitors emerged to attack it both for its proselytizing efforts and its unorthodox theological stance. As it continued to grow, representatives of the cult awareness movement have also arisen, their most virulent assault being launched in the 1990s around a baseless rumor that the church was planning a mass suicide when its members gathered for their annual Holy Supper ritual. Most recently, Apostle Naasón has been arrested and charged with several accounts of sexual abuse, though church leaders maintain that the charges appear to be fabricated and that they expect his full exoneration.

In the twenty-first century, La Luz del Mundo (like Pentecostalism in general) has found itself on an upward trajectory, even as it anticipates the celebration of the centennial of the founding of the church only a few years in the future. While its recent history has not been without some controversy, it has not allowed the obstacles that it has encountered to detract from its continued reaching out to an ever-expanding audience with its message. The question remains as to how long its continued pattern of growth can remain intact.

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