

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF EXODUS

by

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Exodus 4

We are still called to linger at the foot of Mount Horeb, at “**the backside of the desert;**” and, truly, the air of this place is most healthful for the spiritual constitution.

Man’s unbelief and God’s boundless grace are here made manifest in a striking way.

“And Moses answered and said, But, behold, they will not believe me, nor hearken unto my voice: for they will say, The Lord hath not appeared unto thee.”

How hard it is to overcome the unbelief of the human heart! How difficult man ever finds it to trust God! How slow he is to venture forth upon the naked promise of the Lord. Anything, for nature, but that. The most slender reed that the human eye can see is counted more substantial, by far, as a basis for nature’s confidence, than the unseen “Rock of ages.” Nature will rush, with avidity, to any creature stream or broken cistern, rather than abide by the unseen “**Fountain of living waters.**” We might suppose that Moses had seen and heard enough to set his fears entirely aside. The consuming fire in the unconsumed bush, the condescending grace, the precious, endearing, and comprehensive titles, the divine commission, the assurance of the divine presence, - all these things might have quelled every anxious thought, and imparted a settled assurance to the heart. Still, however, Moses raises questions, and still God answers them; and, as we have remarked, each successive question brings out fresh grace.

“And the Lord said unto him, What is that in thine hand? And he said, A rod.” The Lord would just take him as he was, and use what he had in his hand. The rod with which he had tended Jethro’s sheep was about to be used to deliver the Israel of God, to chastise the land of Egypt, to make a way through the deep, for the ransomed of the Lord to pass over, and to bring forth water from the flinty rock to refresh Israel’s thirsty hosts in the desert.

God takes up the weakest instruments to accomplish His mightiest ends:

- “**a rod,**”
- “**a ram’s horn,**”
- “**a cake of barley meal,**”

- **“an earthen pitcher,”**
- **“a shepherds sling,”**

Anything, in short, when used of God, will do the appointed work. Men imagine that splendid ends can only be reached by splendid means; but such is not God’s way. He can use a crawling worm as well as a scorching sun, a gourd as well as a vehement east wind. (See Jonah).

But Moses had to learn a deep lesson, both as to the rod and the hand that was to use it. and the people had to be convinced.

“Cast it on the ground. And he cast it on the ground, and it became a serpent; and Moses fled from before it. And the Lord said unto Moses, Put forth thine hand and take it by the tail. And he put forth his hand and caught it, and it became a rod in his hand: that they may believe that the Lord God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath appeared unto thee.”

This is a deeply significant sign. The rod became a serpent, so that Moses fled from it; but, being commissioned by the Lord, he took the serpent by the tail, and it became a rod. Nothing could more aptly express the idea of Satan’s power being turned against himself. This is largely exemplified in the ways of God.

Moses himself was a striking example. The serpent is entirely under the hand of Christ; and when he has reached the highest point in his mad career, he shall be hurled into the lake of fire, there to reap the fruits of his work throughout eternity’s countless ages.

“That old serpent, the accuser, and the adversary,” shall be eternally crushed beneath the rod of God’s Anointed.

“Then the end - beneath His rod,
Man’s last enemy shall fall;
Hallelujah! Christ in God,
God in Christ, is all in all.”

“And the Lord said furthermore unto him, Put now thine hand into thy bosom. And he put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, behold, his hand was leprous as snow. And he said, Put thine hand into thy bosom again. And he put his hand into his bosom again, and plucked it out of his bosom; and, behold, it was turned again as his other flesh.”

The leprous hand and the cleansing thereof present to us the moral effect of sin, as also the way in which sin has been met in the perfect work of Christ. The clean hand, placed in the bosom, becomes leprous; and the leprous hand placed there becomes clean.

Leprosy is the well-known type of sin; and sin came in by the first man and was put away by the second.

“By man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead” (I Corinthians 15:21).

- Man brought in ruin, man brought in redemption;
- Man brought in guilt, man brought in pardon;
- Man brought in sin, man brought in righteousness;
- Man filled the scene with death, man abolished death and filled the scene with life, righteousness, and glory.

Thus, not only shall the serpent himself be eternally defeated and confounded, but every trace of his abominable work shall be eradicated and wiped away by the atoning sacrifice of Him who **“was manifested that he might destroy the works of the devil.”**

“And it shall come to pass, if they will not believe also these two signs, neither hearken unto thy voice, that thou shalt take of the water of the river, and pour it upon the dry land; and the water which thou takest out of the river shall become blood upon the dry land.”

This was a solemn and most expressive figure of the consequence of refusing to bow to the divine testimony. This sign was only to be wrought in the event of their refusing the other two.

It was, first, to be a sign to Israel, and afterwards a plague upon Egypt. (Comp. Exodus 7:17).

All this, however, fails to satisfy the heart of Moses.

“And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent, neither heretofore, nor since thou hast spoken unto thy servant; but I am slow of speech and of a slow tongue.”

Terrible backwardness! Nought save the Lord’s infinite patience could have endured it. Surely when God Himself had said, **“I will be with thee,”** it was an infallible security. in reference to everything which could possibly be needed. If an eloquent tongue were necessary, what had Moses to do but to set it over against **“I AM”**?

Eloquence, wisdom, might, energy, everything was contained in that exhaustless treasury.

“And the Lord said unto him, Who hath made man’s mouth? or who maketh the dumb, or deaf, or the seeing, or the blind? have not I the Lord? Now, therefore, go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.”

Profound, adorable, matchless grace! worthy of God!

There is none like unto the Lord our God, whose patient grace surmounts all our difficulties, and proves itself amply sufficient for our manifold need and weakness. **“I THE LORD”** Ought to silence for ever the reasonings of our carnal hearts. But, alas! these reasonings are hard to be put down.

Again and again they rise to the surface, to the disturbance of our peace, and the dishonour of that blessed One, who sets Himself before our souls, in all His own essential fullness, to be used according to our need.

It is well to bear in mind that when we have the Lord with us, our very deficiencies and infirmities become an occasion for the display of His all-sufficient grace and perfect patience. Had Moses remembered this, his want of eloquence need not have troubled him. The Apostle Paul learnt to say, **“most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak then am I strong”** (II Corinthians 12:9, 10).

This is, assuredly, the utterance of one who had reached an advanced form in the school of Christ. It is the experience of one who would not have been much troubled because of not possessing an eloquent tongue, inasmuch as he had found an answer to every description of need in the precious grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The knowledge of this truth ought to have delivered Moses from his diffidence and inordinate timidity.

When the Lord had so graciously assured him that He would be with his mouth, it should have set his mind at rest as to the question of eloquence. The Maker of man’s mouth could fill that mouth with the most commanding eloquence, if such were needed. This, in the judgment of faith, is most simple; but, alas! the poor doubting heart would place far more confidence in an eloquent tongue than in the One who created it.

This would seem most unaccountable, did we not know the materials of which the natural heart is composed. That heart cannot trust God; and hence it is that even the people of God, when they suffer themselves to be, in any measure, governed by nature; exhibit such a humiliating lack of confidence in the living God. Thus, in the scene before us, we find Moses still demurring. **“And he said, O my Lord, send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom thou wilt send.”** This was, in reality, casting from him the high honour of being the Lord’s sole messenger to Egypt and to Israel.

It were needless to say that divinely-wrought humility is an inestimable grace. To **“be clothed with humility”** is a divine precept; and humility is, unquestionably, the most becoming dress in which a worthless sinner can appear. But, it cannot be called humility to refuse to take the place which God assigns, or to tread the path which His hand marks out for us. That it was not true humility in Moses is obvious from the fact that **“the anger of the Lord was kindled against him.”** So far from its being humility, it had actually passed the limit of mere weakness. So long as it wore the aspect of an excessive timidity, however reprehensible, God’s boundless grace bore with it, and met it with renewed assurances; but when it assumed the character of unbelief and slowness of heart, it drew down the Lord’s just displeasure; and Moses, instead of being the sole, is made a joint, instrument in the work of testimony and deliverance.

Nothing is more dishonoring to God or more dangerous for us than a mock humility.

When we refuse to occupy a position which the grace of God assigns us, because of our not possessing certain virtues and qualifications, this is not humility, inasmuch as if we could but satisfy our own consciences in reference to such virtues and qualifications, We should then deem ourselves entitled to assume the position.

If, for instance, Moses had possessed such a measure of eloquence as he deemed needful, we may suppose he would have been ready to go. Now the question is, how much eloquence would he have needed, to furnish him for his mission? The answer is, without God no amount of human eloquence would have availed; but, with God, the merest stammerer would have proved an efficient minister.

This is a real practical truth. Unbelief is not humility, but thorough pride. It refuses to believe God because it does not find, in self, a reason for believing. This is the very height of presumption. If, when God speaks, I refuse to believe, on the ground of something in myself, I make Him a liar. (I John 5:10). When God declares His love, and I refuse to believe because I do not deem myself a sufficiently worthy object, I make Him a liar and exhibit the inherent pride of my heart. The bare supposition that I could ever be worthy of ought save the lowest pit of hell, can only be regarded as the most profound ignorance of my own condition and of God's requirements. And the refusal to take the place which the redeeming love of God assigns me, on the ground of the finished atonement of Christ, is to make God a liar, and cast gross dishonour upon the sacrifice of the Cross.

God's love flows forth spontaneously. It is not drawn forth by my deserts, but by my misery. Nor is it a question as to the place which I deserve, but which Christ deserves. Christ took the sinner's place, on the Cross, that the sinner might take His place in the glory. Christ got what the sinner deserved, that the sinner might get what Christ deserves. Thus, self is totally set aside, and this is true humility. No one can be truly humble until he has reached Heaven's side of the Cross; but there he finds divine life, divine righteousness, and divine favour. He is done with himself for ever, as regards any expectation of goodness or righteousness, and he feeds upon the princely wealth of another. He is morally prepared to join in that cry which shall echo through the spacious vault of Heaven, throughout the everlasting ages, "**Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory**" (Psalm 115:1).

It would ill become us to dwell upon the mistakes or infirmities of so honoured a Servant as Moses, of whom we read that he "**was verily faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after**" (Hebrews 3:5). But, though we should not dwell upon them, in a spirit of self-complacency, as if we would have acted differently, in his circumstances, we should, nevertheless, learn from such things those holy and seasonable lessons which they are manifestly designed to teach. We should learn to judge ourselves and to place more implicit confidence in God - to set self aside, that He might act in us, through us, and for us. This is the true secret of power.

We have remarked that Moses forfeited the dignity of being the Lord's sole instrument in that glorious work which He was about to accomplish. But this was not all.

"The anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses; and he said, Is not Aaron the Levite thy brother? I know that he can speak well: and, also, behold, he cometh forth to meet thee; and when he seeth thee, he will be glad in his heart. And thou shalt speak unto him, and put words in his mouth: and I will be with thy mouth, and with his mouth, and will teach you what ye shall do.

“And he shall be thy spokesman unto the people: and he shall be, even he shall be to thee instead of a mouth, and thou shalt be to him instead of God. And thou shalt take this rod in thine hand, wherewith thou shalt do signs” (Exodus 4:14-17).

This passage contains a mine of most precious practical instruction. We have noted the timidity and hesitation of Moses, notwithstanding the varied promises and assurances with which divine grace had furnished him. And, now, although there was nothing gained in the way of real power, although there was no more virtue or efficacy in one mouth than in another, although it was Moses after all who was to speak unto Aaron; yet was Moses quite ready to go when assured of the presence and co-operation of a poor feeble mortal like himself; whereas he could not go when assured, again and again, that the Lord would be with him.

Oh! my reader, does not all this hold up before us a faithful mirror in which you and I can see our hearts reflected? Truly it does. We are more ready to trust anything than the living God. We move along, with bold decision, when we possess the countenance and support of a poor frail mortal like ourselves; but we falter, hesitate, and demur, when we have the light of the Master’s countenance to cheer us, and the strength of His omnipotent arm to support us. This should humble us deeply before the Lord, and lead us to seek a fuller acquaintance with Him, so that we might trust Him with a more unmixed confidence, and walk on with a firmer step, as having Him alone for our resource and portion.

No doubt, the fellowship of a brother is most valuable - **“Two are better than one”** - whether in labour, rest, or conflict. The Lord Jesus, in sending forth His disciples, **“sent them two by two,”** - for unity is ever better than isolation - still, if our personal acquaintance with God, and our experience of His presence, be not such as to enable us, if needful, to walk alone, we shall find the presence of a brother of very little use.

It is not a little remarkable, that Aaron, whose companionship seemed to satisfy Moses, was the man who afterwards made the golden calf (Exodus 32:21). Thus it frequently happens, that the very person whose presence we deem essential to our progress and success, afterwards proves a source of deepest sorrow to our hearts. May we ever remember this!

However, Moses, at length, consents to go; but ere he is fully equipped for his work, he must pass through another deep exercise; yea, he must have the sentence of death inscribed by the hand of God upon his very nature.

He had learnt deep lessons at **“the backside of the desert;”** he is called to learn something deeper still, **“by the way in the inn.”** It is no light matter to be the Lord’s servant. No ordinary education will qualify a man for such a position. Nature must be put in the place of death and kept there.

“We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead” (II Corinthians 1:9).

Every successful servant will need to know something of this.

Moses was called to enter into it, in his own experience, ere he was morally qualified. He was about to sound in the ears of Pharaoh the following deeply-solemn message, "**Thus saith the Lord, Israel is my son, even my first-born: and I say unto thee, Let my son go, that he may serve me: and if thou refuse to let him go, behold I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn.**" Such was to be his message to Pharaoh; a message of death, a message of judgment; and, at the same time, his message to Israel was a message of life and salvation. But, be it remembered, that the man who will speak, on God's behalf, of death and judgment, life and salvation, must, ere he does so, enter into the practical power of these things in his own soul. Thus it was with Moses.

We have seen him, at the very outset, in the place of death, typically; but this was a different thing from entering into the experience of death in his own person. Hence we read, "**And it came to pass, by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision.**"

This passage lets us into a deep secret, in the personal and domestic history of Moses.

It is very evident that Zipporah's heart had, up to this point, shrunk from the application of the knife to that around which the affections of nature were entwined. She had avoided that mark which had to be set in the flesh of every member of the Israel of God. She was not aware that her relationship with Moses was one involving death to nature. She recoiled from the Cross. This was natural. But Moses had yielded to her in the matter; and this explains to us the mysterious scene "**in the inn.**"

If Zipporah refuses to circumcise her son, the Lord will lay His hand upon her husband; and if Moses spares the feelings of his wife, the Lord will "**seek to kill him.**" The sentence of death must be written on nature; and if we seek to avoid it in one way, we shall have to encounter it in another.

It has been already remarked, that Zipporah furnishes an instructive and interesting type of the Church.

She was united to Moses, during the period of his rejection; and from the passage just quoted, we learn that the Church is called to know Christ, as the One related to her "**by blood.**" It is her privilege to drink of his cup, and be baptized with His baptism. Being crucified with Him, she is to be conformed to His death; to mortify her members which are on the earth; to take up the Cross daily, and follow Him. Her relationship with Christ is founded upon blood, and the manifestation of the power of that relationship will, necessarily, involve death to nature. "**And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power; in whom also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead**" (Colossians 2:10-12).

Such is the doctrine as to the Church's place with Christ - a doctrine replete with the richest privileges for the Church, and each member thereof.

Everything, in short, is involved:

- The perfect remission of sin,
- Divine righteousness,
- Complete acceptance,
- Everlasting security,
- Full fellowship with Christ in all His glory.

“Ye are complete in him.”

This, surely, comprehends everything. What could be added to one who is **“complete”** Could “philosophy, “the tradition of men,” “the rudiments of the world,” “meats, drinks, holy days, new moons,” “Sabbaths” “Touch not” this, “taste not that, “handle not” the other, “the commandments and doctrines of men,” “days and months, and times, and years,” could any of these things, or all of them put together, add a single jot or tittle to one whom God has pronounced **“complete”**? We might just as well enquire, if man could have gone forth upon the fair creation of God, at the close of the six days' work, to give the finishing touch to that which God had pronounced **“very good”**?

Nor is this completeness to be, by any means, viewed as a matter of attainment, some point which we have not yet reached, but after which we must: diligently strive, and of the possession of which we cannot be sure until we lie upon a bed of death, or stand before a throne of judgment. It is the portion of the feeblest, the most inexperienced, the most unlettered child of God.

The very weakest saint is included in the apostolic **“ye.”** All the people of God **“are complete in Christ.”** The apostle does not say, “ye will be,” “ye may be,” “hope that ye may be,” “pray that ye may be:” no; he, by the Holy Ghost, states, in the most absolute and unqualified manner, that **“ye are complete.”**

This is the true Christian starting-post: and for man to make a goal of what God makes a starting-post, is to upset everything. But, then, some will say, “have we no sin, no failure, no imperfection?” Assuredly we have. **“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us”** (I John 1:8). We have sin in us, but no sin on us. Moreover, our standing is not in self, but in Christ. It is **“in him”** we **“are complete.”**

God says the believer is in Christ, with Christ, and as Christ. This is his changeless condition, his everlasting standing. **“The body of the sins of the flesh”** is **“put off by the circumcision of Christ.”**

The believer is not in the flesh, though the flesh is in him. He is united to Christ in the power of a new and an endless life, and that life is inseparably connected with divine righteousness in which the believer stands before God.

The Lord Jesus has put away everything that was against the believer, and He has brought him nigh to God, in the self-same favour as that which He Himself enjoys. In a word, Christ is his righteousness. This settles every question, answers every objection, silences every doubt. **“Both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified, are all of one”** (Hebrews 2:11).

The foregoing line of truth has flowed out of the deeply-interesting type presented to us in the relationship between Moses and Zipporah. We must, now, hasten to close this section, and take our leave, for the present, of **“the backside of the desert,”** though not of its deep lessons and holy impressions, so essential to every servant of Christ, and every messenger of the living God. All who would serve effectually, either in the important work of evangelization, or in the varied ministries of the house of God - which is the Church - will need to imbibe the precious instructions which Moses received at the foot of Mount Horeb, and **“by the way in the inn.”**

Were these things properly attended to, we should not have so many running unsent - so many rushing into spheres of ministry for which they were never designed. Let each one who stands up to preach, or teach, or exhort, or serve in any way, seriously enquire if, indeed, he be fitted, and taught, and sent of God. If not, his work will neither be owned of God nor blessed to men, and the sooner he ceases, the better for himself and for those upon whom he has been imposing the heavy burden of hearkening to him. Neither a humanly-appointed, nor a self-appointed ministry, will ever suit within the hallowed precincts of the Church of God. All must be divinely gifted, divinely taught, and divinely sent.

“And the Lord said to Aaron, Go into the wilderness to meet Moses. And he went and met him in the mount of God, and kissed him. And Moses told Aaron all the words of the Lord who had sent him, and all the signs which he had commanded him.”

This was a fair and beautiful scene - a scene of sweet brotherly love and union - a scene which stands in marked contrast with many of those scenes which were afterwards enacted in the wilderness-career of these two men. Forty years of wilderness life are sure to make great changes in men and things. Yet it is sweet to dwell upon those early days of one's Christian course, before the stern realities of desert life had, in any measure, checked the gush of warm and generous affections - before deceit, and corruption, and hypocrisy had well-nigh dried up the springs of the heart's confidence, and placed the whole moral being beneath the chilling influences of a suspicious disposition.

That such results have been produced, in many cases, by years of experience, is, alas! too true. Happy is he who, though his eyes have been opened to see nature in a clearer light than that which this world supplies, can, nevertheless, serve his generation by the energy of that grace which flows forth from the bosom of God. Who ever knew the depths and windings of the human heart as Jesus knew them? **“He knew all, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man”** (John 2:24, 25).

So well did He know man that He could not commit Himself unto him. He could not accredit man's professions, or endorse his pretensions. And yet, who so gracious as He? Who so loving, so tender, so compassionate, so sympathizing?

With a heart that understood all, He could feel for all. He did not suffer His perfect knowledge of human worthlessness to keep Him aloof from human need. **“He went about doing good.”** Why? Was it because He imagined that all those who flocked around Him were real? No; but because **“God was with him”** (Acts 10:38). This is our example. Let us follow it, though, in doing so, we shall have to trample on self and all its interests, at every step of the way. Who would desire that wisdom, that knowledge of nature, that experience, which only lead men to ensconce themselves within the enclosures of a hard-hearted selfishness, from which they look forth with an eye of dark suspicion upon everybody? Surely such a result could never follow from ought of a heavenly or excellent nature.

- God gives wisdom; but it is not a wisdom which locks the heart against all the appeals of human need and misery.

- He gives a knowledge of nature; but it is not a knowledge which causes us to grasp with a selfish eagerness that which we, falsely, call “our own.”

- He gives experience; but it is not an experience which results in suspecting everybody except myself.

If I am walking in the footprints of Jesus, if I am imbibing, and therefore manifesting, His excellent spirit, if, in short, I can say, **“to me to live is Christ;”** then, would I walk through the world, with a knowledge of what the world is; while I come in contact with man, with a knowledge of what I am to expect from him; I am able, through grace, to manifest Christ in the midst of it all. The springs which move me, and the objects which animate me, are all above, where He is, who if **“the same yesterday, and today, and for ever”** (Hebrews 13:8).

It was this which sustained the heart of that beloved and honoured servant, whose history, even so far, has furnished us with such deep and solid instruction. It was this which carried him through the trying and varied scenes of his wilderness course. And we may safely assert that, at the close of all, notwithstanding the trial and exercise of forty years, Moses could embrace his brother, when he stood on Mount Hor, with the same warmth as he had when first he met him, **“in the mount of God.”**

True, the two occasions were very different. At **“the mount of God”** they met, and embraced, and started together on their divinely-appointed mission. Upon **“Mount Hor”** they met by the commandment of the Lord, in order that Moses might strip his brother of his priestly robes, and see him gathered to his fathers, because of an error in which he himself had participated. (How solemn! How touching!) Circumstances vary: men may turn away from one; but with God **“is no variableness, neither shadow of turning”** (James 1:17).

“And Moses and Aaron went and gathered together all the elders of the children of Israel; and Aaron spake all the words which the Lord had spoken unto Moses, and did the signs in the sight of the people.

“And the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord had visited the children of Israel and that he had looked upon their affliction, then they bowed their heads and worshipped” (Ver. 29-31).

When God works, every barrier must give way.

Moses had said, **“the people will not believe me.”** But the question was not, as to whether they would believe him, but whether they would believe God. When a man is enabled to view himself simply as the messenger of God, he may feel quite at ease as to the reception of his message. It does not detract, in the smallest degree, from his tender and affectionate solicitude, in reference to those whom he addresses. Quite the contrary; but it preserves him from that inordinate anxiety of spirit which can only tend to unfit him for calm, elevated, steady testimony.

The messenger of God should ever remember whose message he bears.

When Zacharias said to the angel, **“Whereby shall I know this?”** was the latter perturbed by the question? Not in the least. His calm, dignified reply was, **“I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee: these glad tidings”** (Luke 1:18, 19). The angel rises before the doubting mortal, with a keen and exquisite sense of the dignity of his message. It is as if he would say, “How can you doubt, when a messenger has actually been dispatched from the very Presence-chamber of the Majesty of Heaven?” Thus should every messenger of God, in his measure, go forth, and, in this spirit, deliver his message.

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