

CHRIST SUPREME – AN EXPOSITION OF THE THEOLOGICAL MEANING OF “IMAGE OF GOD” IN COLOSSIANS 1:15 – ITS IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE, THEN AND NOW

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RATIONALE

The doubt, which filters the minds of Christians, when placed at a crossroad between two forces: good and evil, divine and physical, eternal and temporary, when some form of calamities strike to test Christian faith, can only be put to rest with a proper understanding of the attributes of the “Image of God” and its significance. The motivation for this discussion is the importance of properly understanding the sphere in which Christ, as the image of God, operates, in terms of how He affects Christians’ perceptions of Him. This is important, because the actions of Christians are triggered and dictated by their own perceptions and understanding of who is the Christ of Colossians.

INTRODUCTION

The Christ of Colossians, presented by Paul as the “image of God”, with His supreme attributes, and their significance, is, indeed, the Christ I never properly understood. The fullness and identity of Christ is thoroughly simplified and expounded for human understanding, appreciation, and application by Paul using a method which sequentially incorporates the revelation of the supremacy of Christ. Such organisation and method had a threefold reason: firstly, to present Christ vividly to the Colossians as the basis of their faith; secondly, to address Colossian philosophy, in which the supremacy of Christ was intended to address, and, finally, reveal a specific code of conduct, which the Christians were required to take upon themselves. Such acquisition of a new code of conduct would reflect evidence of the indwelling of Christ, and was a weapon to fight the Colossian philosophy. It would also be a means, which contemporary Christians would need to use as a solid foundation for an active Christian faith.

This paper investigates, and reflects on, Christ as the “image of God” in Col 1:15, in the light of the Christological hymn in Col 1:15-23, as well as other Pauline epistles in general and the Gospels, as they point towards Christ. The use of the metaphor, which was a means to define the fullness of Christ, was an attempt to rescue the Colossians from the philosophy, and can be of great significance to us. In order to achieve that, an in-depth exegesis and exposition of the term “image of God”, with the implications and significance intended for the Colossians, is important, because the practice and response to our Christian faith can be brought to a complete understanding of who Christ is – the Christ of Colossians.

BACKGROUND

LITERARY CONTEXT

As will be noted later about how Paul designed the style and tone of his letter from prison, the Christ hymn is perfectly presented in poetry – a style that meaningfully addressed the problem he identified. N. T. Wright also supports this literary style: “Most scholars agree that the passage is skilfully

worded and rhythmically balanced, deserving to be called a poem”.¹ Regarding the poetic significance, Wright again comments: “Someone who writes in this way wants his or her readers to stop and think. The most obvious point that the poem makes is the parallel between creation and the new creation.”² The phrase “image of God”, presented in poetry, and placed at the most strategic section of the chapter, which is proven to be the peak of this entire New Testament, needs some attention. This attention must be paid to the echoes and overtones of the language and style (poetry) transmitted, as well as the intended outcome. Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat have a helpful insight to this:

In a world populated by images of Caesar, who is taken to be the son of God, a world in which the emperor’s preeminence over all things is bolstered by political structures and institutions, an empire that views Rome as the head of the body politic, in which an imperial peace is imposed – sometimes through the capital punishment of crucifixion – this poem is nothing less than treasonous. In the space of a short, well-crafted, three-stanza poem, Paul subverts every major claim of the empire, turning them on their heads, and proclaims Christ to be the Creator, Redeemer, and the Lord over all of creation, including the empire.³

Paul, who was an influential person in his society before conversion, knew the exact links to the gospel, and by choosing to employ poetry as the mode of delivery, was smart enough to know it was a well-favoured mode of communication in the Mediterranean world.

CULTURAL SETTING

Paul’s identification of himself as the apostle of Jesus Christ, and the subsequent revelation of the supremacy of Christ, from whom he found his identity and motivation, is not just an ordinary letter to an ordinary church.

¹ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans. 1986, p. 64.

² *Ibid.*, p. 66.

³ Brian J. Walsh, and Sylvia C. Keesmaat, *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*, Downers Grove IL: IVP, 2004, pp. 83-84.

Rather, Paul carefully organised his arguments in a manner that would address the problems that were affecting the church. Some of these problems existed, even before the church came into existence, thus, they are worth of noting, because Paul's use of the phrase "image of God" prior to revealing the supremacy of Christ in the Christ hymn is highly intentional, and thus cannot be undermined. This means that the Colossian church was planted in the heart of a society and culture that was highly influenced by the Graeco-Roman culture – a culture whose worldviews, ideologies, and beliefs were capable of confusing, and even contradicting, the new faith. Regarding the location of Colossae, Lewis Johnson comments: "In the time of Paul, Colossae was attached to the Roman province of Asia. Colossae had been an important city, since it was situated on a well-used highway linking Eastern and Western Asia."⁴ Another Graeco-Roman aspect of culture, which influenced the Colossian church, was Greek philosophy, which demands attention in order to shed some light on understanding Paul's reasons in using the phrase.

Jostein Gaarder's book on philosophy, titled *Sophie's World: a Novel About the History of Philosophy*, prompts a response as it grapples with the worth of humans, from the perspective of Christianity. Gaarder's book appears to leave one feeling as if they were floating in space, and, at other points, confused, or left experiencing a sense of anxiety, and even puzzlement, while reading through the respective parts that portrayed human life as having no real meaning and worth; of being here on earth by chance, with no real knowledge about what life will be like in future – a viewpoint strongly professed within Greek culture.

The Greek culture of Paul's day was dominated by the influences of renowned Greek philosophers, whose teachings and beliefs had been passed down from one generation to another, before the birth of Christ, and saw new philosophers emerging after Christ. One manifestation of these philosophies was that people believed that they could learn about their fate through oracles. One of these philosophies, according to Gaarder, was the oracle of Delphi, where Apollo, the god of the oracle, spoke through his

⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr, "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians", in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 118 (July-September 1961), p. 240.

priestess, Pythia, who sat on a stool over a fissure (gap) in the earth, from which arose hypnotic (charming) vapours that put Pythia into a trance, and she was able to see dreams and visions, which enabled her to be Apollo's mouth piece (Col 1:18 was meant to address such beliefs).

It was also believed that world history was governed by fate, and that the fortunes of war could be swayed by the intervention of the gods.⁵ This meant that every aspect of life, both physical and spiritual, was tied to the cosmic, spiritual world. Thus, one can read between the lines here in the purpose of the use of the phrase "image of God" by Paul. Paul's use of the phrase in a letter to an infant church, which was confronted with multiple cultures (Roman, Hellenistic, Jewish, and Christianity) that were often contradictory to each other one way, or had other unintended implications for the recipient church. There is a need to look into the world-renowned Greek philosophy, which was one of the core characteristics of those cultures, which significantly impacted and shaped the people's perceptions and worldview.

GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The three classical philosophers, Socrates (470-399 BC), Plato (428-347 BC), and Aristotle (384-322 BC), influenced the whole of European civilisation, each in his own way. Socrates "claimed that he was guided by a divine inner voice, and that this 'conscience' told him what was right", meaning insights "lead to the right action", and he claimed that the ability to distinguish between right and wrong lies in people's reason, and not in society.⁶ Platonism held that reality was divided into two regions: one region being the world of senses, about which we can only have approximate or incomplete knowledge, by using our five senses, and the other region being the world of ideas, about which we can have true knowledge, by using our ideas. Plato taught that "man is a dual creature, [with] a body that 'flows', is inseparably bound to the world of senses", and also has "an immortal soul

⁵ Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World: a Novel About the History of Philosophy*, Paulette Møller, tran., London UK: Phoenix, 1994, p. 45.

⁶ Gaarder, *Sophie's World*, p. 59.

– and this soul is the realm of reason, and . . . can survey the world of ideas.”⁷

Aristotle, on the other hand, held that the highest degree of reality is what we “perceive” with our senses. He decided that reality consisted of various separate things that constitute a unity of form and substance, thus, for humans, upon death, the form or spirit ceases to exist the moment the body or substance die. Man is no longer man, the moment he dies.⁸ In line with this belief were the Epicureans, who lived around the year 300 BC. The Epicureans “believed there was no life after death, because, when we die, the ‘soul atoms’ disperse in all directions”. They held that death did not concern them. As long as they existed, death was not there, but when death came, they no longer existed.⁹ The response by people from this background to Paul’s message about the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ would probably have been disbelief.

In light of the above, the book of Colossians stands out as the most influential and thought-provoking book among the Pauline Epistles, because it is directed at opposing and nullifying an old and well-established philosophy. It dominated what could be described as the centre of the world, in terms of politics, religion, and civilisation. Bound in chains, and confined, Paul had nothing to do, or to think about, but to cleverly devise a time bomb. He carefully selected words that would transmit the force of his message with significant impact. He carefully constructed sentences and paragraphs that would, one day, blow up the big thinkers in the Mediterranean world, and cause them to lose hope in their renowned philosophies with the explosive arrival of the news about the true and final philosopher – Jesus Christ – with a true philosophy that had the answers to all of mankind’s unanswered questions. The image of the invisible God had come to declare to humanity that everything came through Him, and exists in Him, by Him, and for Him. Therefore, there was no need to think further, but to declare null and void the baseless philosophies, and surrender to the one true philosophy that Jesus Christ was the source of life.

⁷ Ibid., p. 75.

⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

IMAGE OF GOD IN THE BIBLE

IMAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

The word “image” in Genesis refers to our ancestors, whom the Triune God created in the garden. The appearance of the word in Gen 1:26, 27, regarding the designation accorded by the Creator to the created being embraces a partial reflection of the triune God. This partial reflection of the triune God’s image, according to several scholars refers primarily to the power of dominion over creation. “It is thus understandable that the image of God in man has been equated with that which makes man unique among created things”, as specified in v. 26b, where the triune God specified His purpose in creating man in His own image was to have dominion over the other created things, both living and non-living. Hence, the image in human consisted of the power of dominion.¹⁰ “Man is made in the image of God – in his headship over the earth around him, he is the ‘image and glory of God’ – but he was only a faint and fractional miniature, even in his first and best estate, and now it is sadly dimmed and effaced.”¹¹ C. F. D. Moule makes a comment regarding this, and says that this explicitly speaks about the limits, boundaries, weaknesses, and strengths of the image of God, and is set in contrast to the image of God in Christ Himself, which we will now explore in greater detail, in the light of the New Testament. It is to be noted that, whereas man is thought of as “made *in* (or *according to*) God’s image”, Christ is spoken of, not as “in” God’s image, but as being Himself God’s image (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15). In other words, man is further removed from the original than Christ is.¹²

IMAGE OF GOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

A good portion of the entire New Testament presents us with a clear identification of who Christ is, as the “image of God”, and His mission to

¹⁰ G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatics, Jellema, Dirk W., tran., Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1962, p. 70.

¹¹ John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, W. Young, ed., Birmingham AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 1855, p. 44.

¹² C. F. D. Moule, “New life in Colossians 3:1-17”, in *Review & Expositor* 70-4 (Fall 1973), p. 490.

make known to lost humanity His identity as the image of the unseen God, who was, and who is at work to restore the image in fallen humanity.

Firstly, the “image of God” was initially declared before Jesus’ birth by an angel in Matt 1:22-23, which is seen as the fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy in Is 7:14. “All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child, and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ – which means, ‘God with us’ ” (NIV). We also see, in Matt 26:63-64, where Jesus declared Himself to be the Christ, Son of God, in response to the high priest, who asked Him to confirm if He was the Christ, the Son of God.

Secondly, in John 1:1, we see Jesus, who is referred to as the Word, who was with God, and was God, and was with God in the beginning. “The Word became flesh, and made His dwelling among us” (John 1:14 NIV). Also, in John 14:8 NIV, we read about Philip asking Jesus for a glimpse of the Father, with a desire to see God, and Jesus replied, in v. 9, “Don’t you know Me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father.” H. Dermot McDonald explains this as follows: “He is so the image of God, as the Son is the image of His Father, who has a natural likeness to Him; and he who has seen Him has seen the Father.”¹³ In Rev 3:14b NIV, we read, “These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation”. Similarly, the Colossian Christians read that Jesus “is the εἰκὼν (eikōn = image) of the invisible God” (Col 1:15). Both John 14:9 and Col 1:15 focus on Jesus Christ as truly God, coexisting with the Father from eternity past.¹⁴

Furthermore, like John, who had a similar message, Paul, was communicating to the Colossian church, by assuring them that Jesus Christ is God, is equal in essence to the Father, and is the Creator, and, therefore, is worthy of worship and admiration. However, “this was a concept difficult for polytheistic Greeks to accept, and it also shook the foundations of

¹³ H. Dermot McDonald, *Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, Waco TX: Word Books, 1980, p. 46.

¹⁴ H. Wayne House, “Doctrinal issues in Colossians, part 2: The Doctrine of Christ in Colossians”, in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 149 (April-June 1992), p. 181.

monotheistic Judaism. For a person to claim equality with the Yahweh of the Old Testament was considered blasphemy, which called for punishment by death. In the end, the Jews' refusal to acknowledge Christ as the Messiah, equal with God the Father, led to Jesus' death on the cross."¹⁵

IMAGE OF GOD IN COLOSSIANS: THEOLOGICAL MEANING

The supremacy of Christ was vividly and creatively introduced by Paul in the Christological hymn in Col 1:15-20, using a single word explained the entire Christological hymn – “image” said it all! In addition, Paul also intended to justify and explain to the Colossians the merits and capabilities the image of the invisible God had to accomplish what He had done, as specified in vv. 12-14. The unqualified people were granted qualifications to share in God's inheritance, through redemption and forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness of sins was an act of God alone, as held by the Mediterranean world, and, thus, with such views, the Colossians would have had some difficulty in understanding the identity of Jesus. Mark 2:1-12 is a good example of this, as the teachers of the law thought that Jesus was blaspheming God, by forgiving the sins of the paralytic. Marianne Thompson makes a profound statement in support of this: “Of primary importance in this hymn, and for understanding God's actions in the world, is in an understanding of who Jesus is in relationship to God. He is described as ‘the image of the unseen God’.”¹⁶ Here, Paul's strategy was to reveal the answer before asking the question that related to it, so that, every time he asked a question, it was a rhetorical question being asked, primarily to explain the answer. This strategy is unique, and it even goes against the natural laws of teaching and learning. No wonder, as referred to earlier, it was a language time bomb, intended to explode false notions, and reveal, in the minds of the new believers, the authenticity of the operation of God in physical form. John Eadie precisely states:

Christ, as Creator and Preserver, is the palpable image of God. In this aspect, it is not visibility of person that can be maintained, but the embodiment of attribute in visible result, as in Rom 1:20, where it is

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁶ Marianne Meye Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, The Two Horizons New Testament Commentary, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2005, p. 28.

said, “the invisible things” of the Creator are “clearly seen”. . . . His prophetic epithet was “Immanuel, God with us”. In His incarnate state, He brought God so near us as to place Him under the cognisance of our very senses – men saw, and heard, and handled Him – a speaking, acting, weeping, and suffering God.¹⁷

How marvellous, and how wonderful, to have God come to dwell among mankind, so that man could see and believe in Him, and eventually receive salvation! This was a stark contrast to the scenario in the OT, where man did not live after seeing God. Through Christ, a new story unfolded, a story worth retelling, of how sinful man saw God, and encountered life instead of death. The mystery was explained; the distant Being was made real; the higher, supernatural Being was made personal. The invisible Creator presented Himself visibly, and the spiritual presented Himself physically, all in the name of restoration, so that the image that was lost in the garden, at the expense of a piece of fruit, could be restored to its original identity, at the expense of the sole author of the image, who hung on the cross.

The value of the reconciled image is so precious, much more precious than in the garden; so precious that words cannot explain, because the author and destiny of life commissioned neither a proxy nor a substitute. He, rather, came humbly and lowly in human form to reclaim, through a tree, what was lost under a tree. A single piece of fruit cost God’s Son His own life. That’s far too good to be true, and so real to be good. John Eadie’s melodious words induce an incredible peace:

Perhaps, the Great God remains concealed forever in the unfathomable depths of His own essence, which, to every created vision, is so dazzling as to be “dark with excess of light”. There needs, therefore, a medium of representation, which must be His exact similitude. But where can this be found? Can any creature bear upon him the full impress of Divinity, and shine out in God’s stead to the universe without contraction of person, or diminution of splendour? Could the Infinite dwarf itself into the finite, or the Eternal shrink into a limited circle? May we not, therefore, anticipate a medium in

¹⁷ Eadie, *Colossians*, pp. 45-46.

harmony with the original? The lunar reflection is but a feeble resemblance of the solar glory. So that the image of God must be Divine as well as visible – must be ὁμοούσιος (homoousios) – of the same essence with the original. . . . Christ is the image of God – not σκιά (skia) – a shadowy or evanescent sketch, which cannot be caught or copied – but εἰκὼν (eikōn), a real and perfect likeness – no feature absent, none misplaced, and none impaired in fullness, or dimmed in lustre. The very counterpart of God He is.¹⁸

CAPABILITIES, AUTHORITIES, AND VICTORIES OF THE IMAGE OF GOD

The Christological hymn of Col 1:15-23 is a detailed declaration and affirmation of the capabilities, authorities, and victories of the image of the invisible God. These are the characteristics that qualified and confirmed Jesus to be of the same essence with God, because only God alone can possess the capabilities, claim the authority, and proclaim the victories declared in Col 1:15-23. Thus, because He was divine, and an exact counterpart of God, He created everything visible and invisible (capability); He is head of the church (authority); the first-born among the dead (authority); He reconciled all things to Himself (victory); and made peace through His blood on the cross (victory). This was a powerful weapon Paul used, not only to address the Colossian philosophy, but also to declare totally wrong and condemn the blasphemy charge that was laid against Jesus, which led to His arrest and crucifixion. Hence, Paul declared to the unbelieving people of the Mediterranean world that Jesus was not just an ordinary person, or another prophet, as was claimed. Jostein Gaarder also adds to this by saying “one . . . central tenet was that Jesus was both God and man. He was not the ‘Son of God’, on the strength of His actions alone. He was God Himself”, and the message of the church was precisely that God became man, and further explains that Jesus was not a demigod (half-man, half-god). Belief in such demigods was quite widespread in the Greek and Hellenistic religions.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁹ Gaarder, *Sophie's World*, p. 136.

THE IMPLICATIONS AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE IMAGE OF GOD FOR CHRISTIANS TODAY

KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST – A PREREQUISITE TO A HEALTHY SPIRITUALITY

Let us start by quoting the saying, “every story has its own ending”. The echoes of Paul’s time bomb, which exploded in the Middle East nearly 2,000 years ago, firstly, to elevate the new Colossian Christians to new heights in their enriched knowledge of the supremacy of Christ, introduced as the “image of God”, and, secondly, to destroy the Graeco-Roman world’s unrealistic and baseless philosophies, can now be heard as loud and clear as it was first heard nearly two millennia ago. This is especially so in Melanesia, where we have origins and genealogy that was once bombarded by the old philosophy of animism, the story does not end on our side of the globe, but the legacy lives on and remains active, as if the explosion of Paul’s time bomb, which exploded two millennia ago, just exploded two days ago. This will be so, as long as the echoes of our fathers’ clinging to animism lingers, and it echoes in the hearts and minds of professed Christians, one way or another.

Nevertheless, we do not have a history that tells us that we have been created in the image of those spirits, which our forefathers lived for, in the old philosophy. On the contrary, we are so privileged to know and be reunited with Christ – the exact representation of the unseen God, who remained a mystery to our forefathers (although some distinctions were drawn), who, instead, had allegiances with the devil, who robbed us of our rights and privileges in the garden, and, in doing so, created enmity with God, in whose holy image we were created. The deities, with whom our forefathers “played marbles with, and spoke sweet candies to” were the very spirits that once destroyed our perfect relationship with God our Father. Thus, we should make it our aim not to get ourselves bogged down in this old philosophy, because Christ has won the victory for us on the cross, to release us from captivity.

By His cross, He releases His people, not only from the guilt of sin, but also from its hold over them. ‘He breaks the power of cancelled

sin', as the hymn-writer put it. Besides blotting out the record of their indebtedness, He has also conquered those forces, which used the record as a means of controlling them. "He stripped the principalities and powers, and made a public exhibition of them."²⁰

There is a distinction between the metaphor "image of God" in man before the fall and the "image", which Christ, who is the Image of images, came to restore. On the one hand, the Genesis account of the original image of God in man, prior to the fall, was a state of ultimate perfection. While, on the other hand, the image, which was defaced by the fall, is the one, which Christ, who is the image, and ultimate and equal representation of God, came to restore, and His work is ongoing. As the image in Christians identifies itself with its source of origin, upon the exercise of faith in the accomplished work on the cross, and comes to conversion, it is imperative that Christians progressively, renounce the sinful nature that had dominion and control over the "image", and undergo a process of sanctification, characterised by the knowledge of God, through faith, until the original state of perfection is reached, during the second advent of Christ. This was the whole intention of Paul's letter to the Colossians. Thompson vividly explains this, "Here, Paul describes a process of renewal, 'according to the image of its Creator'. . . . Because Paul has earlier identified Christ as the 'image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15), Christ is the image of the renewed humanity."²¹

APPLICATION TO THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

So far, we have taken one of the two journeys, described by N. T. Wright as the historian's journey, into the abyss of time and space of some 2,000 years in search of the original meaning of the text, in the light of the culture of the church planted in the Lycus Valley. It is also appropriate and fitting to start the other journey, also termed by Wright as the theologian's or preacher's journey, to apply the lessons learnt to our lives today.²²

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems, part 4: Christ as Conqueror and Reconciler", in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (October-December 1984), p. 297.

²¹ Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 78.

²² Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 41.

In Melanesian culture, the first-born son of a chief is recognised as the heir of his father. Thus, the son has the right to represent his father in attending important social gatherings as a proxy, and receives the respect his father would have been accorded. However, the biblical teaching of Jesus being the image of His father even goes a step further, because Christ is not just a proxy, but God. Jesus, who is known in Christendom as the Son of God, can also be mistaken for an inferior deity, especially by Christians within Melanesia, who are influenced by our cultural understanding of the relationship between a father and son. Jesus, as equal with God – not a subordinate – needs to be emphasised and taught in the churches.

My conversion to faith in Jesus as “the Jesus I never understood before”, after a study of Colossians, when, in fact, I was supposed to have been fully aware of who is Christ, as a trained theologian, rings a bell loud and clear that there are uneducated Christians out there, who need to know the Christ of Colossians. Jesus Christ, as Emmanuel, and not proxy to God, needs to be adequately preached, because a thorough knowledge of Christ will draw Christians out of their spiritual poverty, and will eventually lead them to renounce any intermediary or supplementary beings they may have, as stand-by alternatives, for use when calamities strike.

Finally, the knowledge of Christ, as the image of the invisible God, and of His mission and accomplishment on the cross, leads to a surrendered life, as Col 3 demands from us, to put off the old self and put on the new self, which is renewal of the image that once was corrupted in the garden. As James Orr puts it, “To put on the new man is but to put on the image of God in Christ. To this we are predestinated that we should be conformed to the image of His Son.”²³

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