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The Bible and the Search for a New Society

A. Gabriel, MSFS

Abstract: Biblical experience is ensconced between two great myths, namely the ‘yesterday’ of the paradise lost (Gen 2:4b - 3:24) and the ‘tomorrow’ of the paradise regained, ‘the new heaven and the new earth’ (Rev 21:1-4). The biblical understanding of the human person and human society also moves back and forth from sectarianism to universalism, and from individualism to corporate existence. God, human person and cosmos are often seen as separate entities, but at the same time, they cannot be understood without being related to each other. And the Bible says that Yahweh is the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob; he is the King of Israel, and is the Lord of the universe. In the New Testament he is the ‘Abba’ of Jesus Christ (Mk 14:36) and the Father of humanity, whom we ought to “worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:21, 23-24). And the Bible is the unfolding of the divino-human intentions in the sacred-secular history of a people, albeit all people of all times are partakers of this divino-human economy.

Keywords: Bible, New Society, Divino-human intentions, Divino-human Economy

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A. Gabriel, MSFS

Dept. of Scripture, JDV, Pune

Biblical experience is ensconced between two great myths, namely the 'yesterday' of the paradise lost (Gen 2:4b - 3:24) and the 'tomorrow' of the paradise regained, 'the new heaven and the new earth' (Rev 21:1-4). The biblical understanding of the human person and human society also moves back and forth from sectarianism to universalism, and from individualism to corporate existence. God, human person and cosmos are often seen as separate entities, but at the same time, they cannot be understood without being related to each other. And the Bible says that Yahweh is the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob; he is the King of Israel, and is the Lord of the universe. In the New Testament he is the 'Abba' of Jesus Christ (Mk 14:36) and the Father of humanity, whom we ought to "worship in spirit and truth" (Jn 4:21, 23-24). And the Bible is the unfolding of the divino-human intentions in the sacred-secular history of a people, albeit all people of all times are partakers of this divino-human economy.

1. Patterns of Faith in the Search for a New Society

In any religious tradition metaphysics, politics and ethics are inseparable. Often it is not noticeable because of the mythopoeic thought enshrined in the origin of religions. The 'sense' of

the Divine is correlated to the understanding of the nature of the cosmos, the function of the state and the values of life.¹ The theogonies and cosmogonies of the Ancient Near East are attempts to understand these points. Though the myth-making process in ancient Israel has some similarities with its neighbours, its faith tradition is different in nature.

1.1 The Beginnings

The uniqueness of Israel is that, at a very early stage, it distinguished itself by monotheism, at least in its central strand. For, in its amphictyonic existence, Israel's faith was not primarily tied to the sanctuaries like other similar confederations. Though the old Canaanite shrines were their cult places, Yahweh was their God. "What happened was that Israel's own form of worship, with the shrine of the Ark, found a home for itself in an ancient Canaanite place of worship but was not so bound up with this place that it could not be shifted if occasion arose, to another place. This raises the question of the form of worship observed by the Israelite tribes and their special relationship to God."² Already at the time of Israel's tribal confederacy, Yahweh occupies 'the entire sacred domain'; he alone is 'active in the world'; he is 'conceived by egalitarian sociopolitical

analogies'; he is 'coherently manifest in power, justice and mercy'; he is 'in bond with an egalitarian people'; and he is 'interpreted by egalitarian functionaries'.³ This sets the pattern of belief in the biblical tradition.

The Israelite society in its formative period was egalitarian in every aspect. "In spite of its inner tensions, Israel . . . is clearly in conception and in practice one community: socially, economically, politically, militarily and religiously."⁴ The loyalty of the cult-community to Yahweh was inseparable from absolute social justice and egalitarian socioeconomic relations.

1.2 The Time of Monarchy

The establishment of monarchy in Israel heralded the arrival of stratification of the Israelite society. In some sections of the society, the monarchy came to be seen as an alien institution, uncharacteristic of Israel which was the people of Yahweh.⁵ The people were reminded of the evils of monarchy (I Sam 8:11-18). "The rapid amplification of the transition to monarchy, from the modest court of Saul to the proverbial magnificence of Solomon over a period of little more than a generation, magnifies the sense of the state's departing from the 'Israelite' norm."⁶ The outcome was evident. Solomon exported subsistence materials like wheat and oil in exchange for costly timber (I Kings 5:9-11), precious metals and ivory (I Kings 10:14-22) which were used for the king's household. Stratification which replaced egalitarianism continued its sway throughout the period of monarchy even after the division of the

kingdom. Rationalisation of the exploitation of the lower class by the upper class was sought in the belief system and displayed in the cultic practices. "The ideology of legitimacy is conveyed to different levels of society by a variety of means ranging from the literary output of a royal bureaucracy, to monumental architecture, iconography and ceremonial."⁷ Dissenting voices came from the prophets who vehemently condemned it as idolatry and injustice. The cult was no more an expression of faith, but a sin. "Come to Bethel and transgress; to Gilgal, and multiply transgression; bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days" (Amos 4:4). The prophet Amos is very clear about what people are to do: "Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel and do not enter into Gilgal;" (Amos 5:4b-5a) and "let justice roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The pre-exilic prophets Proto-Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah and Zephania made similar analyses.

Woe to her that is rebellious and defiled, the oppressing city! She listens to no voice, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the Lord, she does not draw near to her God. Her officials within her are roaring lions; her judges are evening wolves that leave nothing till the morning. Her prophets are wanton, faithless men; her priests profane what is sacred, they do violence to the law. The Lord within her is righteous, he does no wrong; every morning he shows forth his justice, each dawn he does not fail; but the unjust knows no shame (Zeph 3:1-5).⁸

The oppressor class – princes, judges, prophets and priests – hold the political, social and economic power; besides they claim to possess knowledge, especially the knowledge of God. The four groups of the oppressive structure which Zephania mentions are analogous to today's categories of politicians, bureaucrats, media and religious bigots. These groups control political power, wealth and knowledge. It is a clear deviation from the biblical vision of the human society.

1.3 Exilic Period

The destruction of Israel and Judah, and the consequent exile made the people reflect upon what went wrong with them. In fact, 'the faithful remnant' came into its own and carried forward its faith and hope. In the preexilic period, the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the *Torah* was the cult, whereas in the exilic period it was the human heart.

For thou hast no delight in sacrifices;
were I to give a burnt offering,
thou wouldst not be pleased.
The sacrifice acceptable to God is
a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God,
Thou will not despise (Ps 51:16-17).

The prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutro-Isaiah imprinted a definite stamp on this turn-around.

Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I make a covenant with the house of Israel ... not like the covenant which I made with their fathers ... I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; ... And no longer shall each man teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying 'Know the Lord', for they shall

all know me, from the least of them to the greatest... (Jer 31:31-34).

Religion is no more cult-oriented or cult-centred, but person-oriented and person-centred. The destruction of the Jewish state and of the temple-centred cult and the encounter with foreign religious traditions in the exilic period made Israel reexamine its own faith. In this period, the Israelite religion started to move out of its own prison walls of a narrow nationalism and worldview. Deutro-Isaiah includes all nations in the saving plan of God. "The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Is 52:10). The promises of Yahweh need not always be fulfilled through the instruments appointed from Israel, but by anyone whom Yahweh chooses from anywhere. Thus Cyrus becomes the 'anointed' of Yahweh to fulfil his plan (Is 45:1-7). In the Old Testament the term 'anointed' is used only to refer to a reigning king. It signifies that some one is given the authority to do something as Yahweh's delegate.⁹ King Cyrus, a non-Israelite, becomes God's instrument to fulfil his plan.

Belief in the resurrection of the body, which had not been explicit till then, appears in this period due to the influence of the Persian religions. A shadowy existence in *sheol*, the place of the dead without any reference to happiness or the reverse (Gen 37:35; 42:38; 1Sam 2:6; Job 14:13) is replaced by the concepts of heaven and hell, reward or punishment after death. The metaphysical dualism of good and evil enters the biblical world. It is intrinsi-

cally linked to the belief in the resurrection. "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2). This in fact answers the hitherto unsolved problem of evil and suffering raised mainly by the book of Job.

1.4 Intertestamental Period

The crisis of Old Testament faith reaches its climax in the inter-testamental period. Besides the Eastern religions, it came into contact with Hellenism which spread rapidly after the conquests of Alexander the Great. The understanding of man and the 'Transcendent' in Hellenism was significantly different from that of the Israelites. Qohelet took a critical view of Israel's religious tradition. "In his writings the foreground is not occupied by the manifold traditional motives; rather, he transforms them in his extremely individualist criticism by shattering a fixed connection between action and result, and proclaiming the absolute inexplicability of the divine action in nature and history."¹⁰ Ben Sira in the second century B. C. unwilling to give in to the onslaught of Hellenism, reaffirmed the traditional faith of the Fathers. '*Torah*' was the eternal divine wisdom communicated to Israel; and it is only in adherence to it that one can find harmony in life. Ben Sira's language of social justice surpasses that of the prophets:

Like one who kills a son before his father's eyes is the man who offers a sacrifice from the property of the poor. The bread of the needy is the life of the poor; whoever deprives them of it is a man of blood. To take

away a neighbour's living is to murder him; to deprive an employee of his wages is to shed blood. (Sir 34:24-27).

On the other hand, in the Wisdom of Solomon, a book of the first century B.C., we see an explicit attempt made to harmonise Israel's traditional faith and Greek philosophy. The author tries to prove that there is no opposition between genuine faith and scientific reasoning. It is the same with Philo of Alexandria.

The political crisis of this period contributed to the religious thought of the time. The political, cultural and intellectual domination by the Greeks and later by the Romans put the Israelite faith under strain. A brief period of independence at the time of the Maccabean-Hasmonian dynasty did not bring about any relief. Wielding the royal and priestly powers, the new rulers were neither the descendants of David nor that of Zadok, contrary to the traditional Jewish expectations. Moreover, they proved to be as cruel as the alien monarchs. The people were caught between the utopia of the peaceable kingdom and the realities of oppressive political and military powers around them. One of the significant features of this period is the birth of apocalypticism, which sought answers to the problems, in a direct divine intervention. "The real meaning of events and persons, within an overall view of history, and the disclosure concerning the imminent change in the structure of society are directed to providing men and women with a way of looking at the world and God's intervention in it.

This then gives coherence and significance to existence in the present when historical circumstances offered only perplexity and despair.”¹¹ One can see the formation of different groups with their specific religious beliefs and goals – often contradicting each other – within Judaism. The Pharisees and Sadducees,¹² the Essenes and the Qumran Community,¹³ and the Zealots could claim to be the adherents of one faith, though they had different goal-directive belief systems.

The new society is a dream, not only in the biblical tradition but also, for that matter, in all the religious traditions. In the ups and downs of Israel’s history, it always searched for a free fearless and egalitarian society. Its faith affirmations are conditioned by the evolution of the society. As we look at these affirmations we cannot take all of them today as absolutely normative – the very nature of the evolution is such – but suggestive of an ever evolving society which inherently looks forward to peace and harmony – not just an existence but transcendence.

2. The Nature of the New Society: The New Testament Vision

The ideal society was already envisaged in the Old Testament times. At the cosmic level: “The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them . . . They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Is 11:6-9). At the level

of the human societal existence: “They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Is 2:4; Mic 4:3). Amidst the chaotic disorder of the nations and of the cosmos, the prophets looked forward to a free and fearless society upon which Yahweh would have supreme control. But it is very much an earthly society. “The conceptual material of their promise is based upon a belief in the enduring significance of Zion as the sole place of the revelation of God.”¹⁴ It is in fact a call to humanity not to live in violence, exploitation and suffering, but in peace, justice and harmony not only with fellow human beings, but with all living realities. The New Testament idea of the new society surpasses it because of its identification of this vision with what has been realised in the person of Jesus Christ.

2.1 The Symbols and Metaphors:

The New Testament vision of the new society is expressed in a variety of symbols and metaphors such as Kingdom of God/Heaven, new Israel, new age, new covenant, Body of Christ, wine and the branches, shepherd and sheep, and new heaven and new earth. Down through the centuries, some of these symbols came to be interpreted with strict ecclesial connotations. But they, in fact, have an atemporal and meta-spatial significance. “A symbol, in contradistinction to a sign, represents another entity and refers to something outside itself. Its interpretation aims at deriving the meaning-value that tran-

scends the literal meaning.”¹⁵ Moreover certain symbols may have an inexhaustible overflow of meanings. Wheelright makes a distinction between two types of symbols, namely *steno-symbol* and *tensive symbol*. The former has a one-to-one relationship to that which it represents as in mathematical symbols, and the latter can have a set of meanings that can neither be exhausted nor be adequately expressed by any one referent.¹⁶ The symbols of religious language belong to the second category and the interpretation of these symbols should open up new horizons of understanding of religious experiences.

One of the New Testament symbols that offers inexhaustible meaning is ‘the Kingdom of God/Heaven’. The Greek term, *basileia tou theou* which is translated as the Kingdom of God, stands for the Aramaic expression *malkut di ‘elaha’* which means God’s ruling activity.¹⁷ This Kingdom comes into conflict with the evil forces of the world. The apocalyptic eschatology foresees this. “It means the regime of God which will destroy the present course of the world, wipe out all contra-divine, satanic power under which the present world groans – and thereby, terminating all pain and sorrow, bringing in salvation for the people of God which awaits the fulfilment of the prophets’ promises.”¹⁸

The Kingdom of God breaks into human history, not because of human initiative, but because of divine intervention. Throughout its chequered history, Israel experienced the impotence of human efforts to regain paradise. The

New Testament community built the concept of the Kingdom of God on this realisation. “Nowhere do the early Christians display any confidence in the idea that man by his own means can transform this world into a second paradise. The Kingdom of God is to be brought in by God. The strong emphasis on sin and its deep destructive effect on man, his nature and his world prevents the early Christians from placing any hope in man himself.”¹⁹

Here lies the essential difference between the Marxian and the biblical models of the new society. ‘The new heaven and the new earth’ that Marxism promises is totally the result of human effort, whereas the Bible sees it as a divine gift and human task. There is no place for human passivity. The ethical dimension which is the human responsibility cannot be swept under the carpet of divine intervention. In announcing the nearness of the Kingdom of God, the New Testament emphasises the need for repentance and believing in the Gospel (Mk 1:15). A Christian is exhorted to do “whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious...” (Phil 4:8). This is the Christian standard of existence.

Jesus announces the arrival of the rule of God as a present reality, unlike the apocalyptic Judaism of his time, which thought that it would be entirely in the future. Jewish apocalypticism considered two aeons – the old one (the present), the aeon of sin, suffering and death, and the new one (the future), the aeon of eternal bliss which is directly under God’s control. The New Testa-

ment sees the dawn of this new age in the life, teaching and works of Jesus. The first Christians believed that theirs is the community of the new age or the new aeon. Theirs “is not simply the non-historical existence of the (still future) aeon to come, but first of all a new society . . . The historicity of this society is accentuated by locating it ‘now in this time’ (i.e., within the present evil aeon).”²⁰ So the above mentioned symbols and metaphors which speak of the ‘newness’ are, in fact, referring to the present reality, inaugurated by Christ, and oriented to fulfilment for which a collective human accountability is attached.

2.2 The Leader

The Judaeo-Christian religious experience underlines the fact that there can be only one leader, eternal and absolute – that is God. He is the Lord of history and of human destiny. In the perfect society, God becomes “everything to every one” (1Cor 15:28). The whole world is the creation of Yahweh and the Davidic king was his representative – his anointed (Ps 2) – on earth, ruling from Zion. Though he has the title, son of God, it was only functional unlike the kings of the neighbouring countries. For instance, the emperor of Egypt was considered to be the direct descendent of the supreme God, Re. Amon-Re, King of the gods says to Amen-hotep III,

My son, of my body, my beloved,
Neb-maat-Re,
My living image, whom my body created,
Whom Mut, Mistress of Ishru in

Thebes, the lady of the Nine Bows,
bore to me,
And (she) nursed thee as the Sole Lord
of the people –
My heart is very joyful when I see thy
beauty;
I work a wonder for thy majesty,
That thou mightest renew youth,
According as I made thee to be Re of
the Two banks.²¹

As the Israelite king was only a delegate, the ultimate leadership of the society was with Yahweh who is given various titles, such as King, Father, Husband, Go’el (Redeemer), Shepherd etc. When his deputies failed in their task, God promises that he himself will shepherd his flock (Ez 34:11-20).

In the later period, Israel thought that the Messianic king, a descendant of David, would establish the ideal society. The early apocalyptic literature – Daniel, I Enoch and IV Ezra – visualised a divine envoy, the figure “like a son of man” (Dan 7:13), who would appear at the end of age and fulfil this task.

The New Testament sees that these expectations are realised in Jesus of Nazareth. He is of Davidic descent (Mt 1:1; 20:30-31; Lk 1:32; Rom 1:3) and the pre-existent divine person (Jn 1:1-18; Phil 2:6-11; Col 1:15-20). He is God’s Son who fulfils the divine plan for the new society by becoming the inclusive representative of humanity. The titles of Jesus in the New Testament – Son of God, Messiah, Lord, Son of man, King, Shepherd, Saviour, Servant, Second Adam, Lamb etc. – are indicative of what he is, what he has done and what he will do for the new society. These are *tensive symbols* and many

of them, according to the New Testament writers, are suggestive of victory after suffering and death. The Messianic leader/King/Shepherd lays down his life to bring about the renewal of the society. He establishes a new corporateness of humanity in him by his righteousness and obedience, in contrast to the old corporateness of humanity in Adam, characterised by sin and disobedience (See Rom 5:12-21). In contrast to Adam in the first myth, Jesus Christ in the last myth becomes the central figure of the Bible's search for the new society. The Lamb-leader in the book of Revelation is a rich symbol with a concentration of meanings.²² He is the divino-human figure. He is "the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David" (Rev 5:5) and receives equal worship and honour with God (Rev 5:13-14). To express his supreme sacrifice, supreme power and knowledge, the author says that it is a slain lamb, but stands with seven horns and with seven eyes (Rev 5:6). For his redemptive work (Rev 5:9-10), he receives praise from "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea" (Rev 5:13). We see the reconstruction of the whole cosmos by the Lamb-redeemer. Moreover, he is the Shepherd (Rev 7:17), controls the destiny of the people (Rev 13:8) and makes war against the evil forces, and becomes "the Lord of lords and King of kings" (Rev 17:14). By laying down his life/self-emptying, he becomes the centre of the 'new heaven' and 'new earth,' where God "will wipe away every tear ... and death shall be no more, neither there shall be mourning nor crying nor pain any more ..." (Rev 21: 4).

2.3 The Neighbour

One of the fundamental premises of the biblical tradition is the oneness of the whole of humanity. Physically all are descendants of Adam and Eve, and they are called to be the children of God universally. But in reality it is practised in varying degrees. First of all, gender inequality is common in most of the societies, both ancient and modern. With Yahweh the God of the universe, Adam the first human person and Jesus Christ the Redeemer of the world, it is obviously a male dominated religious tradition. Women were given only a subordinate role in the society. Slavery was a common phenomenon in the biblical world. Foreigners and gentiles were outside the Jewish commonwealth.

A 'neighbour' is a fellow member of the Israelite commonwealth.²³ The commandment, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19:18), is directed to the people of the covenant.²⁴ The gentile nations like Egypt, Assyria and Babylon are seen as enemies. "The Lord has commanded against Jacob that his neighbours should be his foes" (Lam 1:17b). On the other hand, God's concern for the non-Israelite people was not totally absent. The prophets like Deutero-Isaiah and Jonah will testify to it.

The search for a classless and distinctionless society is conveyed in several ways in the New Testament. The term 'neighbour' is essentially coextensive with humankind.²⁵ The condensation of the law is seen in the commandment, apart from the love of God, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mt 22:39; Mk 12:31; Lk 10:27d; Rom

13:9; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8). The meaning of 'neighbour' is stretched to its farthest horizon to all of humanity including one's enemies (Mt 5:43-48). "Who is the neighbour?" was a matter of debate in Judaism in the New Testament period. According to the Sermon on the Mount, those who curse, hate and persecute are also to be loved as neighbours.²⁶ The story of the Good Samaritan is the proof (Lk 10:29-37). The Samaritan who was hated by the Jews becomes a true neighbour to a Jew in distress. The letter of James defines true 'Religion' along the same lines (Jas 1:27).

The New Testament perception is that the mission of Jesus wipes out all distinctions. The progressive identification of the 'person' of Jesus in his dialogue with the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:1-42) indicates it. The woman who first addresses him, in terms of a stranger, as "a Jew" (v. 9) and "Sir" (v. 11) finds a relationship with him in the common ancestor, Jacob (v. 12). Further, she recognises in him "a prophet" (v. 19) and "the Christ" (v. 29). Finally, the story ends with a solemn declaration by the believing Samaritans, "this is indeed the saviour of the world" (v. 42). In the process all distinctions – male vs. female, Jew vs. Samaritan, and Israel vs. Gentile – vanish. In fact, everything in the New Testament that is addressed to human beings "is addressed to them as actual or potential believers, regardless of age, sex, family connections, ethnic background, nationality, race, economic conditions or social status."²⁷ We see it in the Gospels' depiction of Jesus' association and

table fellowship with all kinds of people and several of his sayings.

In spite of its diversity in composition and its pluralism in thinking, the New Testament Church held the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ and the unity of the whole of humanity. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28).

Conclusion: The Unfinished Task

The new society is never clearly defined in the Bible. "It remains a 'vision' shimmering in the distance, a summons rather than a plan, an inspiration more than a programme of action."²⁸ In its experience of God in history, Israel realised that the ideal society could not be realised without freedom, fellowship and justice for all. Any claim of the knowledge of God is futile unless one pursues a sound morality. "The true knowledge of God, and the true and felt knowledge (not merely nominal knowledge) of the relations of man and the universe to Him, and of the true foundations of all ethics and morals, when really felt and acted on, is the means of man's highest well-being."²⁹

The symbols and metaphors of the new society indicate that the common well-being of the entire human family must be ceaselessly pursued. Jesus' life-giving death for the human race is the foundation of the new relationship with God, and it calls for self-giving in human relationships. It has to manifest itself in the day-to-day living; it is not merely a dogma to be believed but a

living and life-giving mystery to be lived. As long as religious experiences and traditions lead to class divisions with their rampant repression of human life in the service of racism, provincialism, casteism, and linguistic and religious fanaticism, humanity will continue to reel under fragmentation and oppression. "The analysis, praxes and ideologies of the past are all instructive, but they are not blueprints or lodestones."³⁰ No religious criteria can

override the concern for the visible needs of one's fellow human beings. "Religious criteria are merely functional. As such, they must be judged by higher criteria that are valid in themselves."³¹ Any one who pursues any goal to the exclusion of 'the other', will never experience the peace and joy of the Kingdom, nor reach 'the new heaven and the new earth'. For in it, everyone is for the other and God is all in all.

Notes

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24. But the statement, "hate your enemy" in Mt 5:43 is not found in the Old Testament. It might have been influenced by Sir 12:4-7 where the author advises not to help the sinners and the ungodly.
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