

The Face on the Cross

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'And Jesus cried again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.'
(Matt. 27:50)

'And Jesus uttered a loud cry, and breathed his last.... And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that he thus breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was the Son of God!"' (Mark 15:37, 39)

'Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this, he breathed his last.' (Luke 23:46)

'When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said, "It is finished"; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.' (John 19:30)

All the Gospel writers lead us to imagine this moment of the death of Jesus. With variations, they graphically portray the last breath of Jesus. We are then left with a dead face on the cross. If we follow the story, that is unavoidable. The transition from life to death is signified by focusing on Jesus speaking and breathing for the last time, after which there is his dead face.

Given the immense significance that came to be attached to the death of Jesus, it is striking that this simple physical description lies at the heart of each of the Gospel stories of the event. It is a decisive moment, but obviously only makes sense as part of the larger story. It is this person suffering this death at the climax of a series of actions, dialogues and events through which Jesus has been uniquely identified.

As regards the need for the larger context, something similar can be said about atonement in relation to salvation. The most common usage is to see atonement focusing on the death of Jesus and salvation as encompassing the whole history of God's saving activity in relation to the world, together with the transformation brought about by it. There are some interpretations of atonement which enlarge its meaning to include what I have just described as salvation, but I want to stay with the common meanings. Most accounts of atonement are attempts to understand the way in which the death of Jesus is related to the salvation of the world. As in the story, there is both a decisive moment and a wider context for understanding its significance. In fact, doctrines of atonement might be described as a range of developed metaphors whose common point of reference is this story and the death at its climax. Narrative (including not only the story of Jesus but also the whole

history of the covenant in the OT and the anticipation of future history) is the unavoidable genre needed to say what is being referred to in the doctrines: the death of this man in this way. The metaphors probe the depths and implications of the story.

There is a diverse, multifaceted richness in this metaphorical elaboration of the death of Jesus. Most major areas of natural and human life have been drawn upon. The most influential have been the cultic (sacrifice), legal (justification, penal substitution), military (victory over sin, death and the devil), financial (exchange, slave-buying, redemption, ransom), social (reconciliation, friendship, family, good example) and political (liberation as in the Exodus, satisfaction as in Anselm's theology). But there is a seemingly infinite range of further ways of discovering the significant connections of this event by drawing on other spheres of reality, such as natural life (light and darkness, seeds dying and rising), literature (tragedy, comedy, fairy story) and overviews of history (evolutionary leaps, decisive turning-points). Each of these has its strengths and weaknesses, its complex history of usage and interpretation, and its resonances with Scripture and with particular communities, experiences and worldviews. To explore the atonement at all adequately is to travel many journeys in which the imagination is stretched at the same time as the mind. One soon finds that 'doctrines of atonement' are fed from complex sources which lead unavoidably into not only all the other major doctrines but also all the main areas of reality through their imaginative and intellectual representations. Most fundamentally of all, travelling these journeys leads one to confront again and again the radical challenge of the crucifixion — challenging one's worldview, personal and political allegiances and practice, and everything to do with God and religion. To find that Luther's dictum, *crux probat omnia*, 'the cross tests everything', is true, is itself the best test that what one is engaging with really is this event and not some sanitised, neutralised or domesticated image of it. The wisdom of the cross is the intractable, endlessly disorienting and reorienting heart of Christian theology. One never masters it, wraps it up or defines it adequately, and the metaphorical explosion to which it has given rise is the linguistic expression of this.

Yet it is not enough to revel in the richness and diversity, or coolly to weigh up pros and cons of each. Doctrines of atonement need to have gripping power, and what that usually means is that one approach is given priority. The best of them have the ability both to find a distinctive way of articulating the essentials and also to relate to other valid ways so that these are not dismissed or ignored. They are marked by a certain intensity. They have the capacity to go to the depths, to help integrate selves and groups in vision and in living and to relate interestingly and strongly to our situation. One can of course define the theological task in ways that avoid this challenge, but the major theologians of past and present have tried to meet it. In the light of this I would argue that there is wisdom in the search for an image or field of imagery that is pivotal, that can help give an imaginative as well as conceptual integration and that can have special relevance in our context. There is

something about the reality of the cross that makes me feel let down by the overviews and attempts to deal evenhandedly with all the approaches without ever risking involvement in the depths of one of them. David Tracy has a phrase, 'a journey of intensification', which catches something of what I see to be desirable here if the definiteness, specificity and urgency of Christian salvation is to be done justice to.

This essay is an attempt to sketch a suggestion in line with that recipe. I take as the key image what is testified to by those four Gospel passages: the dead face of Jesus. I am writing a book on salvation at present in which this will be developed further and with more attention to the way in which this approach connects with Scripture, Christian tradition, contemporary theology, philosophy, arts and other areas, and with the living out of Christian faith today. What I am concerned to do now is to outline the main idea with as few footnotes as possible — and invite responses to it from others who are trying to live and think in relation to the cross of Jesus Christ. There will inevitably be a 'shorthand' feel to this, as there will be many statements that simply point in directions which cannot be explored here.

The shining and hidden face of God

To follow the word *panim*, 'face', through the OT is to be offered a fresh perspective on salvation from that associated with most doctrines of atonement.

The Psalms express in the most direct way the association of the face of God with salvation:

Let thy face shine on thy servant;
Save me in thy steadfast love! (Ps. 31:16)

May God be gracious to us and bless us
and make his face to shine upon us,
that thy way may be known upon earth,
thy saving power among all nations. (Ps. 67:1-2)

Restore us, O God;
let thy face shine, that we may be saved. (Ps. 80:3,7,19)

The shining of the face of God is a summary statement of salvation. The corresponding human activity is to seek this face and live appropriately before it:

Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false,
and does not swear deceitfully.

He will receive blessing from the Lord,
and vindication from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob. (Ps. 24:3-6)

That passage shows the cultic use of the phrase 'face of God' — going up to the temple could be described as seeking the face of God. There is a strong association of the terminology with the community and in particular its worship in which its relationship with God is most concentratedly expressed. But it is also used individually and in many different settings, and indeed takes up the communal and the individual aspects of salvation in a mutually reinforcing way. A whole way of life could be summed up in these terms:

Seek the Lord and his strength,
seek his *panim* continually. (Ps. 105:4)

The desire of God meeting the desire of his people is caught in this imagery:

Thou hast said, 'Seek ye my face'.
My heart says to thee,
'Thy face, Lord, do I seek'. (Ps. 27:8)

It also expresses the fulfilment of desire:

As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness; when I awake,
I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form. (Ps. 17:15)

At its simplest, my thesis about salvation in the NT is that it can fruitfully be explored by seeing how that desire for the face of God is fulfilled through the face of Jesus Christ.

One of the advantages of the focus on the face is that its associations combine simplicity with complexity — in common experience we know how a face both has a distinctive shape, a *Gestalt* that a cartoonist can catch, but also endless expressions, nuances and multifaceted life. The Psalms, and many other strands of the OT, evoke the complexity of salvation through their use of *panim*.

The most radical idea is that of the hiddenness of God's face and the associated themes of God's absence, rejection, forgetting, silence, remoteness and abandonment.¹ There is uncertainty, doubt, despair and overwhelming bewilderment in relation to the face of God in its turning away and hiding. The psalms of lament (which are where most references to the face of God occur in the Psalms) perhaps articulate this most vividly in their persistent questioning:

Why dost thou hide thy face?
Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression? (Ps. 44:24)

1 For an excellent study of this in the Old Testament see Samuel E. Ballantine, *The Hidden God. The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament*, Oxford University Press, 1983.

O Lord, why dost thou cast me off?

Why dost thou hide thy face from me? (Ps. 88:14; cf. Job 13:24)

How long, O Lord? Wilt thou forget me for ever?

How long wilt thou hide thy face from me? (Ps. 13:1)

These are cries from the heart, open questions which cannot be made impotent by remarking that they often coexist with or develop into praise and trust. Lament and radical interrogation of God regarding salvation maintain a persistent and untamed element of protest, doubt, bewilderment and even despair in the heart of the prayer of the tradition. The Psalms figure prominently in the NT crucifixion narratives. The most dramatic is the use of the opening verse of Psalm 22 in Mark's and Matthew's accounts:

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?

Within the psalm itself that is later answered:

... he has not hid his face from him,

but has heard, when he cried to him. (v. 24)

The face allows for this mysterious and continuing dimension of salvation. It also allows a way of talking about the answer to Jesus' cry: the resurrection. The logic of the resurrection is: God acts — Jesus appears. In other words, the 'not hiding' of God's face takes the form of the appearing of the face of Jesus. Here is the pivotal point for the later tradition's wrestling with questions of incarnation and Trinity, both of which were seen as essential for Christian testimony to salvation through Jesus Christ.

There is a further complexity that this theme in the OT helps to articulate. What is salvation *from*? The usage in the Psalms and other books shows that misery, suffering of all sorts, and death are as intrinsic to the answer as is sin or disobedience to God. In the Psalms the latter is less emphasised, but some of the prophets develop a rich theology of the hiding of the face of God as a judgement on sin. Trito-Isaiah sums up the theology perfectly:

Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save,

or his ear dull, that it cannot hear;

but your iniquities have made a separation

between you and your God,

and your sins have hid his face from you

so that he does not hear. (Isa. 59:1-2)

Others who have similar statements are Isaiah (Isa. 8:17), Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 54:8), Micah (3:4), Ezekiel (39:23, 24, 29) and Jeremiah (33:5). The three Isaiahs in particular weave the theme of the presence and absence of God into a prophetic theology of history that gives primacy to a radical confidence in salvation. The characteristic note is in Deutero-Isaiah:

In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you,

but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
says the Lord, your Redeemer. (Isa. 54:8)

That is the compassionate face at the heart of salvation. But the older stress on suffering and death continues and makes the face a suitably resonant image through which to evoke the various dimensions of that salvation which the NT found in Jesus Christ. Most important, the face also leads beyond any over-preoccupation with what salvation is from towards what it is *for*: life with God, before God (among the translations of the Hebrew 'before the face of' are 'before' and 'in the presence of'), enjoying and pleasing and loving God.

The OT part of this essay could proceed for a long time, but for reasons of space I will simply point to some other relevant lines of development. In the stories of Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel the face language gives a fascinating angle on responsibility, sin, guilt, shame and punishment. Jacob's salvation at Jabbok Ford is through risky encounters face to face with God and with Esau, including the granting of a new identity as 'Israel' and the transcending of relations of dominance and submission (Gen. 32-33). In Exod. 32-34 there is a complex and paradoxical mediation of the salvific presence and word of God to Moses against the background of the fundamental threat of idolatry, and this was to inspire one of the main NT uses of the theme of the face in 2 Corinthians 3-4 (discussed below). One illuminating way of understanding the OT practice of sacrifice is in terms of access to the presence of God and behaviour before God. And the prophetic weaving of the theme of the face of God and of God's servant into a theology of God's judgement and restoration reaches one of its deepest points in the Servant Songs in Deutero-Isaiah.

The face of Christ

Now to return to that dead face on the cross. What are the advantages of thinking about atonement in relation to that?

If, as I think, one of the fundamental criteria for Christian doctrine is a rich relationship with the OT, then that is one advantage. In the NT the theme is also there. It is clearly explicit in the transfiguration, in Paul, and in the book of Revelation, but it is also pervasively present in other ways. The Gospel stories are largely about Jesus's face to face relationships: most of the action happens in the interpersonal sphere of ordinary encounter. If one uses the idea of 'facing' as an interpretative aid, then its literal and metaphorical ramifications are vast, ranging through the great variety of meetings, dialogues, addresses and conflicts; through ideas of rejection of evil, with conversion and repentance as 'turning'; the Last Supper authorising a face to face community around a meal; and an eschatology ('now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face' — 1 Cor. 13:12). In the Fourth Gospel the word made flesh (and what is more characteristically human flesh than the face?) is the keynote, and 'seeing his glory' has all the complexity of the OT theme of the shining and hidden face of God. And embracing all the NT is the faith

that what is told about is all happening 'before the face of God', *coram Deo*; *enopion tou theou*. One way of talking about God, human existence, sin, evil and physicality is in terms of the dynamics of facing.

It can also be developed to connect with other ways of talking about atonement: sacrifice in relation to the worship, presence and favour of God; justification as being able to stand forgiven before 'the judge judged in our place'; military confrontation, conflict and death; interpersonal reconciliation; satisfaction in Anselm as relying on a praise-centred notion of the honour of God and what spoils joy before God; the light of salvation as focused through a particular face (2 Cor. 4:6); the physicality and bodiliness of a salvation that takes up the whole of creation, gloriously embodying it in a transfigured face — transformed matter!

There are still further advantages. Being inseparable from bodiliness means that the material content of death is unavoidable. So many theories of atonement seem (at least in their metaphorical associations) to abstract some sort of transaction or decisive event from the sheer physicality of what is described in the Gospels. It is one of the merits of the sacrificial imagery that it never lets us forget the actual bloodiness of this death, and in many ways I see the sacrificial as the richest complement to the face of Christ. In death, the two come together: the dead face is simply part of the dead body, but the strongest reminder that it is this particular human person who has died. The dead face is a physical sign of this person, his history and his fate. It is perhaps the best symbol of Holy Saturday, that mysterious lacuna around which Good Friday and Easter Sunday pivot, and which has so fascinated some twentieth century theologians. It is as if focusing on the dead face allows a proper, gospel-like reticence about the lacuna. It does not disallow the explosion of metaphors listed above. It acts somewhat like a black hole of infinite, impenetrable meaning sucking into it all other reality, represented in the inexhaustible stream of metaphors and their conceptual elaborations.

But it is, most importantly, a black hole with a human face. Evil, sin, death, suffering and all the distortions and corruptions of creation can now be identified with this face. There can be no separation of person and work here. The face of this person leads us to the heart of his work. Many atonement theories rely too heavily on the language of 'event' — one objective happening once and for all, described in the language of the law court (judgement, justification, penal substitution), battlefield (victory), marketplace (financial transaction) or one of the other spheres mentioned already. The dead face by no means rules out event language — it is incomprehensible without it. But it ties it into person language in a way that other forms of expression do less adequately. And its irreducible physicality reminds us of the limits of even such an indispensable genre as narrative when it comes to rendering personhood.

The dead face also suggests a critique of what is perhaps the main contemporary overemphasis: the language of relationship. It is only in a peculiar sense that one can talk of a dead face being 'in relationship' with others. If this dead face of Jesus is intrinsic to salvation, then there is needed a radical critique of concepts of salvation which major on concepts of mutuality, reciprocity,

interpersonal consciousness or communication. They may indeed all be sucked into the black hole in order to be reconstituted as appropriate metaphors, but the dead face is a vital criterion for appropriateness.

The simple, massive point here is that for salvation to be realized this dead face had to be made alive — by God. It is with the whole, resurrected, transformed person of Jesus Christ that the New Testament identifies salvation. Atonement is best thought of in ways that do justice to personhood, bodiliness and divine initiative together. The face of Christ allows for this. And in addition, as suggested above, because of the logic of the resurrection testimony (God acts, Jesus appears), it is an appropriate place from which to see the very concept of God being reconceived in response to the implications of this person. Not the least interesting of the investigations called for would be into the term *prosopon* in Christology and its eventual convergence with *hypostasis*. In our own century it is perhaps the theme of 'the death of God' or 'the crucified God' that has most directly dealt with the meaning of the crucified and risen face of Christ.

Baptism and eucharist

The early Church managed to do without any defined doctrine of atonement. The reason seems to be that its 'doctrine' was primarily enacted in baptism and eucharist and was such an integral part of community life that it had the status of the 'common sense' of the Church. John McIntyre convincingly argues this especially as regards atonement and eucharist.² Clearly there have been few areas so disputed as the sacraments in Christian history. I am not at all concerned to repeat what can be found on this topic in the current flood of theological dictionaries. I will simply indicate how the theme of the face intrinsically connects atonement with both of these.

I have been largely scriptural in my sources so far. Now I will take the Church of England Alternative Service Book's service of 'Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion' as my reference point.³

The service is a rich interweaving of scriptural reference and imagery, but there are certain key points and themes which can be held together and illuminated by noting the way faces figure in it. The whole service takes place 'before God and his Church' (p 231). The initial questions are about turning: 'Do you turn to Christ?' 'Do you repent of your sins?' 'Do you renounce evil' (p 230). The basic mark of Christian identity, the cross, is then traced on the forehead of each one to be baptized. The cross on the face responds to the face on the cross. Then there is an injunction: 'Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified' — which allows for all the resonances of facial behaviour associated with shame.

The bishop's prayer of thanks and blessing (p 231) moves through the baptism of Jesus, the Exodus through the Red Sea and the death and

2 John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology. Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1992, Chapter 1.

3 *The Alternative Service Book 1980*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, Sydney, Auckland, Toronto 1980, pp 227ff.

resurrection of Jesus. There are two main emphases. The first is on the blessing of the water 'that your servants who are washed in it may be made one with Christ in his death and in his resurrection, to be cleansed and delivered from all sin.' Turning to Christ is only one part of the new 'facing' involved in baptism. It uses the imagery of face to face confrontation with Christ. But here we have the principal complementary imagery of identification with Christ, in whom sin is cleansed, involving facing the world as his body. The interplay of confrontation and identification is characteristic of the NT and is expressed in many ways. 'Facing' language is just one way, whose fruitfulness has rarely been done justice to. It will be taken up again below. The second emphasis is on the Holy Spirit coming on the baptized 'to bring them to new birth in the family of your Church, and raise them with Christ to full and eternal life.' Here the new face joins the family.

The declaration of faith is 'before God and his Church'. Then in the water baptism the bishop names the candidate while pouring water over him or her and baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. The interplay between naming and facing is another rich theme in the Bible and Christian tradition, both regarding God and human beings. Here they converge as the bishop faces and names the candidate in the name of God and in the presence of God and the people. The content of the faith is 'one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit', the Trinitarian God for whose identification as such the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were the pivotal events.

I move on now to Holy Communion. I will not attempt to move through this service, but will redescribe it in relation to the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper in a way that has the potential for developing the understanding of atonement and salvation that I have begun to sketch above. This is not meant to bypass the long history of eucharistic theology and controversy — the introduction of a fresh approach to atonement usually means that the same issues and differences need to be thought through all over again. It is intended to suggest in shorthand form how the new approach might begin to rethink this sacrament. I am also begging a good many questions of NT scholarship — but they too would have to await a fuller treatment.

The redescription runs as follows, simplified by concentrating on the accounts in 1 Cor. 11:23-26 and Mark 14:17-25. Jesus at the Last Supper, face to face with his disciples over a meal (recalling other meals in his ministry and probably the Passover too) talks about the most drastic disruption of relationship, betrayal. He shares bread and wine representing his body and blood. In other words, while present before them he invites them to identify with him and his death by eating and drinking. Being in his presence is therefore united with 'internalising' him. His death is the pivotal event in the uniting of confrontation and indwelling. The language of covenant is used, relating to each other and to God in a new way because of his offering of his life (blood). Paul's account says: 'Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' (v. 25) The remembering is to happen in an ongoing face to face community.

Paul continues: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.' (v.26) Here the content of the community life is a communication embodied through mouths that eat, drink, and in doing this proclaim a particular death. The narrative of that decisive happening is vital, but it is tied into the continuing dynamic of remembering it and identifying with it in a community life which has been through betrayal and bereavement. But there is a further dimension suggested by 'until he comes'. 'Come, Lord Jesus!' seems to have been the *cri de coeur* of many early Christians. It is an eschatology of the 'face to face'. The face of the one who shared bread and wine and was crucified is expected to appear in glory. The Christian ultimate is symbolised in this face. Mark too has this ultimacy of the face to face, expressed in a picture of feasting: 'Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.' (v.25) Here one might find the priority (without denying complementarity) of the imagery of 'being before Christ' over 'being in Christ', realised now in a meal which looks back to Jesus Christ having one meal and looks forward to him having another.

This is salvation through the hospitality of God in Christ. The atonement is through the pivotal event of the death of Jesus Christ inseparable from his resurrection. What happens in that? There is no end to the attempts to express it — all those metaphors and doctrines. But perhaps the most fundamental thing to be said is that there the transformed humanity of Jesus Christ decisively happened. In the tradition of Paul a powerful statement of this is in the letter to the Ephesians, which some scholars think had an originally baptismal or eucharistic setting. That letter has a cosmic horizon of salvation, the vision being of 'a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him (Christ), things in heaven and things on earth' (1:10). But the critical event is the death of Christ, seen in chapter 2 as the creation of peace between Jews and Gentiles (thus embracing all humanity). It is a radical divine hospitality: 'for through him (Christ) we both have access in one Spirit to the Father' (2:18). And what is at the heart of that? It is intention to 'create in himself one new man (*anthropos*, humanity) in place of the two, so making peace' (2:15). In a suggestive ambiguity, the Greek might mean that he himself is the one new *anthropos* or that he creates the new community as one new humanity (perhaps as his partner, anticipating the marriage analogy of Christ and the church in chapter 5). It is a linguistic coincidence of identification and confrontation. Either way, the place of transformation is the body of Christ crucified, and previously the Church has been called 'his body, the fulness of him who fills all in all' (1:23 — that also has interesting alternative translations). Ephesians characteristically speaks in spatial metaphors of indwelling, filling, breaking down of walls, inwardness and so on, and it is in subtle spatial terms that the letter articulates in prayer what is perhaps the most daring of all conceptions of the extravagant salvific hospitality of God:

... that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted

and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fulness of God. (Eph. 3:16-19)

A cadenza

I have already mentioned 2 Cor. 4:6 as an important text for the proposal in this article. It says:

For it is the God who said, 'Light will shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

As the description of it as 'this treasure' in the following verse makes clear, it is a summary of Paul's gospel. It has already been anticipated by 3:18, which draws out the transformative dynamics of this salvation:

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding (or reflecting) the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

There again we have a fruitful ambiguity: the face both beholds the glory of God in confrontation with the face of Christ and embodies it in reflection. It is a community dynamic ('we all'), infinite in its richness and extent (the dimensions of God's glory) and complexly resonating with some of the most important OT themes recalled by the rest of chapter 3. Given all this, might it not be time to develop this way of articulating a biblical doctrine of atonement for today, whose essence is remembering that that face of glory was the face on the cross?

One final point takes up my earlier mention of the urgency of the message of salvation. Urgency can be of many sorts — coercive, insensitive, selfish, overwhelming, impatient. I suspect that the thought of the face of Jesus Christ might help us to have the right sort of urgency. It is the urgency of loving appeal; of weeping over Jerusalem and over a dead friend; of facing evil and suffering to the point of death; and of a passionate desire that is utterly realistic about the sort of people we are and yet trusts in the inconceivable generosity of God:

My heart has said of you, 'Seek his face':

your face, Lord, I will seek.

Do not hide your face from me.

(Ps. 27:10-11)

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