



AN INTRODUCTION TO ST. EPHREM

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Abstract: This academic paper is an attempt to analyze the cultural background of St. Ephrem. This paper provides a broader look at the theological formation of St. Ephrem. The cultural influence is very vital in understanding the works of St Ephrem. Major Ephremian Eucharistic imageries are also introduced here briefly.

Key Words: St Ephrem, Medicine of Life, Eucharistic Imagery

1. INTRODUCTION

Every human being is fashioned within the culture of which he or she is part. Therefore, the study of the works of St. Ephrem must begin with a historical search to the Life of St. Ephrem to unleash the theological treasures of his works. Ephrem the Syrian (306-373), born in Nisibis and served as a deacon in Edessa, is a prominent Christian theologian poet.¹ All Churches with apostolic traditions venerate him as a saint. He has written multifarious hymns, poems, sermons, and prose exegesis. According to P. S. Russel, "Ephrem displays delicacy of touch in his use of scripture."² He used many composite images in his works.³ Sebastian Brock brings a beautiful comparison of the imageries used by St. Ephrem, such as 'the Robe of Glory' and 'the Medicine of Life,' which indicate the sacraments of 'Baptism' and 'Holy Eucharist' respectively. He says that a person is gifted the Robe of Glory in Baptism and granted The Medicine of Life in the Holy Eucharist.⁴ He quotes St. Ephrem, "Our Lord baptized humankind with the Holy

Spirit, he nourished it with The Medicine of Life (Nisibian Hymns 46:8)."⁵ The works of St. Ephrem were the need of the time because he lived in a society where Arians, Marcionites, Manicheans, Bardaisanites, and such gnostic sects propagated heresies.⁶ Therefore, it is true to say that the majority of his works were intended for defending the true faith and teachings of the Church. His reflection of the Divine Mysteries made him popular because the theological depth in his works was very great. That is the reason why even now his theological reflections are used in the liturgy of the Church.

There existed a mixed culture consisting of polytheism, Judaism, and several Christian denominations in Nisibis at the time of St. Ephrem. The linguistic culture was also like the same. The ordinary means of communication was Aramaic. Greek and Latin were used as the administrative language.⁷ Therefore, it is necessary to know the specialties of the complex ethnicities before reading St. Ephrem.

¹ Cf. T. Paniker, "St Ephrem and the Eucharist" in *Aikya Samiksha*, II/1 (2005) 5.

Cf. P. S. Russel, *St Ephrem the Syrian and St Gregory the Theologian Confront the Aryans* (Kottayam: SEERI, 1994) 11.

² P. S. Russel, *St Ephrem the Syrian and St Gregory the Theologian Confront the Aryans*, 41.

³ Cf. P. S. Russel, *St Ephrem the Syrian and St Gregory the Theologian Confront the Aryans*, 86.

⁴ Cf. S. Brock, "A Hymn of St Ephrem on the Eucharist", 63.

⁵ Cf. S. Brock, "A Hymn of St Ephrem on the Eucharist", 64.

⁶ Cf. G. John, *Swargeeyamanna* (Mavelikara: St. Paul's Book Depot, 1989) 187.

⁷ Cf. Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet* (Kottayam: SEERI, 1990) 9-10. (N.B. Here the author is a bishop from Kerala)



Mar Jacob, a signatory in the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE), was the bishop of Nisibis. Ephrem was doing his ministry under him (later, this ministry gained him the title The Founder of the School of Nisibis). It was Mar Jacob who gave diaconate to St. Ephrem. The sudden upheavals in the political scenario of that time caused a drastic change in the Life of St. Ephrem. The edict of Milan legalized Christianity in the Roman Empire in 313. The death of Emperor Constantine I and the inability of the successors to protect the Empire offered a golden opportunity to Shapur II of Persia to besiege Nisibis in 338 CE. So we come across the second phase of St. Ephrem as a refugee in Edessa. All these political instabilities were well narrated poetically in “The Hymn of Nisibis”. He has compared this political situation with that of the Ark of Noah in the book of Genesis. Shapur again attacked the surrounding cities of Nisibis around 359 CE. Constantius II could not respond, and the campaign of Julian ended by witnessing his sorrowful death in 363. His successor Jovian was forced to surrender Nisibis to Persia, and it culminated with the expulsion of the entire Christian population to Persia.⁸ Therefore, the second phase of the Life of St. Ephrem was spent in the school of Edessa, where Syriac, a dialect of Aramaic, was spoken. As stated above, he was also confronted by Arianism, Marcionism, Manicheism, and several types of Gnostic teachings.⁹ He defended the Nicene orthodoxy through his hymns. According to Aprem:

He [St. Ephrem] preached many sermons against the heretics. His eloquence kept his audience spell-bound and often moved them to tears. As a participant in the Council of Nicaea, he defended Nicene Orthodoxy against Arians, Bardaisan, Marcion, and Mani. His poems and sermons are a great authority for theologians of the Church of the East as well as of the

Universal Church. His teachings about the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Eucharist, and Virgin Mary, were strong barriers against contemporary and later heresies.¹⁰

All the works of St. Ephrem are not available, but around four hundred hymns are still preserved. Ephrem is a vantage point of many cultural heritages, such as Judaism, Greek Philosophy, and Mesopotamian tradition of symbols. The majority of his literary works are in lyrical form. All those lyrics are pedagogical hymns.¹¹ The poetic scheme of Bardaisan might have influenced him, and he used the same poetic form (*Madrashé*) to defend the faith by devising the hymns with doctrines to make the Christians conscious about the heretic teaching.¹² Apart from poetry, he used verse homilies (*memre*) and biblical commentaries too.

As stated in the preceding paragraphs, St. Ephrem used the poetic form to teach the catholic doctrines and implemented those hymns in the prayers.¹³ Therefore, the Syriac churches used the works of St. Ephrem in the liturgy and canonical prayers. Moreover, since the zealous missionaries from the Persian Church did mission work in the far East, the St. Thomas Christians are also influenced by the teachings of St. Ephrem.

2. ST. EPHREM AND THE SYRIAC CHRISTIANITY IN THE EAST

Christianity began in Jerusalem. Later it spread to other places in Asia too. Christianity in Nisibis and Edessa is generally known as Syriac Christianity because the celebration of the liturgy and writing of theology was in the Syriac language. Like Greek and Latin, Syriac was also one of the main languages of early Christianity. As said in the introduction, Nisibis was under Roman Empire until the time of the Persian invasion. The Edict of Milan granted religious freedom to Christians, and it was one of the reasons for spreading the Christian faith in the place of the

humanity and divinity represents peace, perfection and salvation; in contrast, docetism and other heresies sought to divide or reduce Christ's nature and, in doing so, rend and devalue Christ's followers with their false teachings.” Cf. P. S. Russel, *St Ephrem the Syrian and St Gregory the Theologian Confront the Aryans*, 7.

¹³ Cf. T. Paniker, “St Ephrem and the Eucharist,” 5.

⁸ Cf. Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet*, 17.

⁹ Cf. G. John, *Swargeeyamanna*, 187.

¹⁰ Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet*, 18

¹¹ Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet*, 18

¹² “The Hymns Against Heresies employ colourful metaphors to describe the Incarnation of Christ as fully human and divine. Ephrem asserts that Christ's unity of



Roman Empire. The heretic influences were hazardous to the Catholic Faith of the Syriac Christians in Nisibis at the time of St. Ephrem. Ephrem had to defend Faith from heresies like Gnosticism, Marcionism, Manicheism, and above all, from Arianism.

3. SYRIAC LITERATURE AT THE TIME OF ST.

EPHREM

Syriac was used as the literary language of Aramaic speaking Christianity in the early centuries.¹⁴ There were many literary works in Syriac from the second to the twentieth century. This long period of Syriac literature can be divided into six periods for the convenience of analyzing the literary works by classifying the ascetic authors and other writers. The periods of Syriac literature are; a) the earliest literature (2 & 3 century), b) the golden age of Syriac literature (4th C), c) fifth to mid-seventh century, d) mid-seventh to the end of the thirteenth century, e) 14th – 19th century, and f) the 20th century. Due to Arab invasion (7-20th C), the writers of the Syriac churches preferred (or were forced) to write Arabic rather than Syriac.¹⁵ Therefore, the Syriac Christian Scholars of the 19th century played a vital role in translating Greek Philosophy and science to the Arab World. In this process, all those literary and philosophical works in Greek were translated first to Syriac and then to Arabic. Later those works were translated to Latin from Arabic. Therefore it is true that Syriac was a bridge in connecting Greek Philosophy to Western Europe.¹⁶

Here our concern of Syriac Literature rests upon the first two periods of the Syriac literature. First, the pre-Ephremic works including *the Diatessaron, the Old Syriac Gospels, Works of Bardaisan, the Odes of Solomon, the Acts of Thomas, the Works attributed to Melito the Philosopher, the Syriac Sentences of Menander, the Letter of Mara, the*

Story of the Armaean Sage Ahikas and so on.¹⁷ Among these early Syriac writings, the first five works are significant when we analyze the poetical works of St. Ephrem. When the literary works of St. Ephrem are analyzed, it is very evident that he was influenced by the writing style (writing in meter) of Bardaisan and the allusive character of the *Odes of Solomon*.¹⁸

In the first two centuries, Baptismal and the Eucharistic theologies were very strong. The early Syriac Christianity was acquainted with symbols and imageries. Therefore, we find allusive language in the Syriac literature. The religious persecution and the life situation might have been the two prominent reasons for using this kind of allusive language in literature. This is what we see in the *Odes of Solomon*. In the same way, Bardaisan of Edessa also used allusive language to spread wrong teachings. He tried to interpret Christology by using the existing astrology and metaphysics and ended in heresy.¹⁹ Even then, he contributed a poetic style to Syriac Literature (pentameter). He taught that the incarnation of Jesus Christ was to restore the harmony of cosmic elements (fire, water, earth, and air). Apart from the heretic teachings of Bardaisan, Aryanism was also prevalent in society.

Another prominent theologian in Syriac literature was Aphrahat (+145). His theology was based on Judaism. He lived in the interior parts of the Persian Empire. He contributed 23 demonstrations in Syriac. These are some of the pre-Ephremian works in the Syriac literature. When these works are scrutinized, it is very clear that there is a gradual growth in the development of theology as well as poetical style.

¹⁴ Cf. S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature in Moran Etho-9* (Kottayam: SEERI, 1997) 7.

¹⁵ “Period D (7th -13th cent.) belongs to the time of the Omayyads (7th – 8th century), ‘Abbasids (750c.- 1100), Seljuks (in Turkey, 11th/12th centuries) and Mongols (from 13th century). Period E (14th -19th cent.) belongs to the time of (successively) Mongol, Mamluk (along with other local dynasties), and Ottoman rule in Western Asia, and opened with a time of great devastation and destruction through war

and the Black Death. Period F (20th cent.) belongs to the time of the breakup of the Ottoman Empire and the emergence of the modern nation states in West Asia.” Cf. S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac*, 10.

¹⁶ Cf. S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 11.

¹⁷ Cf. S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 14-18.

¹⁸ Cf. S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 14-28.

¹⁹ Cf. S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 15.



3.1. CULTURAL BACKGROUND

St. Ephrem is a culmination of three cultures such as Greek, Jewish, and Mesopotamian traditions.²⁰ This triple heritage is visible in his writings. According to Aprem, “Mar Aprem introduced acrostics into Syriac poetry, in imitation of some Hebrew poems, each strophe of which began with a letter of the alphabet.”²¹ The Eucharistic metaphor of the Medicine of Life is one of the prominent examples of the ancient Mesopotamian cultural influence.²² This imagery refers to Jesus Christ and the Eucharist in all the works of St. Ephrem. Many of the imageries were taken from the Old Testament (*The Hymn on Paradise* is one of the best examples.), and it shows that he used to refer Jewish Bible. Ephrem was also influenced by Greek culture. For example, the Greek concept of purification is visible in his works. He was aware of the way of the theological thinking of the Greek Christians. These three cultural heritages are fine-tuned in the writings of St. Ephrem.

3.2. ST. EPHREM’S INFLUENCE AND CONTRIBUTION TO SYRIAC LITERATURE

St. Ephrem’s influence on Syriac Literature is remarkable. According to Brock, “St. Ephrem has left a large body of religious poetry, some of it of very great beauty and as a result of his enormous reputation in antiquity, many of his poems were translated into Greek, and so came into influence the great Byzantine liturgical poets, from Romanos onwards.”²³ He was a theologian who

employed poetry as an expressive means to defend the faith.²⁴ He composed poetry in the form of ‘*Memre*’ and ‘*Madrasha*’.²⁵ He introduced the twelve syllabled (doceca syllabic) metre into Syriac poetry.²⁶ His approach to theology is rooted in Scripture, and the method he used for teaching theology was well accepted among the people of God. Ephrem uses many biblical images and symbols in his poems, from describing the Eucharistic Mysteries and the Economy of Salvation.²⁷ The fundamental doctrines of the Catholic Church were easily imprinted in the hearts of the people through his poetic style of heptasyllabic couplets. He made use of the imageries familiar to the people. Therefore, they could associate the content of theology with that of the existing meaning of the imagery and thereby learn the exact meaning of the doctrine. For Example, St. Ephrem explains the incarnation of the Second Person in the Holy Trinity and connects it with the imagery of The Medicine of Life in *Hymn on Nativity* as follows:

Let Eve today rejoice in Sheol,
For her daughter’s Son
has come down as the Medicine of
Life
to revive His mother’s mother
(Nativity 13:2).²⁸

His commentary on the *Diatessaron* deals with the interpretation of the *Diatessaron*. His other contributions to the Syriac literature are *Commentary on Acts*, *Commentary on the Pauline Epistles*, *Prose Refutations* (which includes five discourses addressed to Hypatius, against false doctrine, against Bardaisan, against Marcion, against Mani), *Discourse on Our Lord*, *Letters to Publius* (Eschatological teachings), *Memre on Faith*, *Memre against Bardaisan*, *On*

as the metre of St Ephrem), while the *madrasha* is used for lyric poetry written in stanzas, which can be in a variety of different syllabic metres, though for anyone poem the same meter is adhered to throughout.” S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 23.

²⁶ Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet*, 18.

²⁷ Cf. T. Paniker, “St Ephrem and the Eucharist,” 5.

²⁸ Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 99.

²⁰ Cf. T. Paniker, “St Ephrem and the Eucharist,” 5.

²¹ Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet*, 19.

²² Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* (Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992) 19-24.

²³ S. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality*, 53.

²⁴ Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 160.

²⁵ “The *memra* is employed for narrative poetry, and is written in couplets consisting of 7+7 syllables (later known



*Jonah and the Repentance of Nineveh, On the Sinful Woman, On Solitudes, Madrashe on Faith, Madrashe on Nisibis,*²⁹ *Madrashe against Heresies* (Marcionism, Bardaisan, Mani, etc.), *Madrashe on Virginity, Madrashe on the Church, Madrashe on Nativity, Madrashe on Unleavened Bread, Madrashe on Paradise, Madrashe on the Fast, Madrashe against Julian* and so on.³⁰

Therefore, his writings remain always new and relevant to the postmodern world. There is no wonder in calling him the “Harp of the Holy Spirit” because the Holy Spirit inspires the saintly people to ruminate over the Scripture and seek the hidden treasures inside. St. Ephrem became influential in the East and the West through his hymns, biblical interpretations, and theological discourses. When his literary works are analyzed, it becomes evident that he developed the Syriac literary style.

4. EUCHARISTIC IMAGES AND SYMBOLS IN ST. EPHREM³¹

The theology of St. Ephrem is known as the theology of imageries and symbols. Symbols go beyond the usual way of thinking. It carries the reality which it symbolizes. Ephrem was aware of the fact that symbols are part of human beings. Therefore, man can reach mystic experience through symbols. Symbols elevate one’s mind from physical to metaphysical reality. Since every symbol has a hidden nature, it must be appropriately interpreted. Here some of the Eucharistic symbols in St. Ephrem’s literary works are analyzed. We will introduce some of the imagery here to avoid repeating those Eucharistic imageries in the second academic paper. Moreover, it will help us to focus on the Eucharistic imagery of the Medicine of Life. Therefore, we will not expound the said imagery in detail here, but we will briefly introduce the same.

The content of the title, “Eucharistic Images and Symbols in St. Ephrem,” is prepared mainly from the findings from the book *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem* by Sebastian Brock. Brock has brilliantly picked out the Eucharistic imageries from the entire hymns of St. Ephrem. It is necessary to get a glimpse over those Eucharistic Imageries. He has pointed out three primary Eucharistic metaphors in *The Luminous Eye*, such as “The Medicine of Life³²,” “The Coal of Fire³³,” and “The Pearl³⁴.” These three imageries will be discussed here in detail to develop the succeeding academic papers. These three imageries are used in the works of St. Ephrem to denote the Holy Eucharist. These Eucharistic imageries show the different aspects of the Eucharist. Ephrem offers a whole profusion of types and symbols to explain the holy Eucharist because symbols are needed for the human intellect to comprehend metaphysical ideas.

4.1. THE MEDICINE OF LIFE

Medicine of Life is the key imagery studied in this dissertation. The analysis and the interpretation of this imagery will probe the fact that religious language can transcend people’s minds to the divine. By using this imagery St. Ephrem proves that Jesus Christ is the Medicine of Life. St. Ephrem has come to this conclusion as a result of his deep meditation of the Holy Scripture and the teachings of the Church. He has been influenced a lot by the Gospel of John. We will explain it in the second academic paper. Apart from this, he uses many Old Testament incidents to define the meaning of this Eucharistic imagery. For example, “Moses hid the symbol of Christ as a Medicine of Life in the unleavened bread.”³⁵ He gradually develops the idea of the Medicine of Life by selectively taking the Old Testament episodes.

²⁹ “These poems deal largely with the history of Nisibis and its bishop and of the adjacent cities...” Cf. Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet*, 21.

³⁰ Cf. S. Brock, *A Brief Outline of Syriac Literature*, 23-28.

³¹ Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 99-114.

³² Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 99.

³³ Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 103.

³⁴ Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 106.

³⁵ G. Chediath, *Mar Aprem: Pesaha Geethangal* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 2009) 38.



4.2. THE COAL OF FIRE

Ephrem employs the metaphor ‘the coal of fire’ to represent the Eucharist. This imagery is taken from the prophets (Isaiah 6:6). Ephrem says that all the Christians hold and consume Christ, the new Coal of Fire. The same imagery is used in the Holy *Qurbano* of the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. When the Holy Eucharist is distributed, the priest prays, “The Coal of Fire, which is Your Body and Blood, is given to the true faithful.” It shows how Ephrem’s theology influenced the Catholic Church later.³⁶

4.3. THE PEARL

Ephrem’s poems on the pearl are also an indirect indication of the Eucharist.³⁷ He says in a poem that he took a pearl into his hands and in that he watched the symbols which revealed the images of the Kingdom and the glory of God. That pearl became a fountain from which he drank the mysteries of the Son.³⁸ Ephrem symbolically presents the pearl as the Eucharist.

4.4. BREAD OF LIFE

He compares the unleavened Bread of the Passover as a symbol of the Bread of Life, representing the Eucharist.³⁹ In this way, St. Ephrem has used the Passover celebration to illustrate the parallelism between the Eucharist and the Old Testament unleavened bread.

4.5. PASCHAL LAMB

The paschal mystery is usually understood as the redemption effected by Jesus Christ.⁴⁰ The most important

imagery of the Eucharist used by St. Ephrem is the Paschal Lamb. The Last Supper is the meeting point of the Old Testament Lamb and the True Lamb. It indicates that Eucharist is the continuation of the Last Supper and the sacrifice on the Cross. Therefore, the Eucharistic celebration in the Church makes present the paschal mystery.

5. CONCLUSION

The theological thoughts of St. Ephrem are augmented with imageries, symbols, and metaphors. He extensively used many root metaphors such as a physician, mirror, Medicine of Life, and so on. The employing of imageries familiar to the people has rendered his works more popular as well as poetical. According to Aprem, “In his poetry, St. Ephrem has taken an approach of inquiry to the spiritual reality.”⁴¹ Therefore, he made use of many symbols and imageries to bring out the theology of the Eucharist. His brilliant implementation of the Old Testament imageries to explain the Paschal Mysteries was enough to prove that Jesus continues in the world and gives Himself through the Holy Eucharist. To prove that, he makes use of the imageries like ‘the Coal of Fire’, ‘the Pascal Lamb’, ‘the Pearl’, ‘the Medicine of Life’, and so on and gives a new interpretation. His brilliance in connecting two contradictory ideas is praiseworthy. For Ephrem, there is a connection between incarnation and the Eucharist. He conveys the fact that the Eucharist is the extension of incarnation. The fruit of incarnation is salvation, and that is experienced through the Eucharist.

The proper analysis of the historical background clarifies that the community where he lived was familiar

³⁶ “In Your Bread, Lord, there is hidden the Spirit who is not consumed, in Your Wine there dwells the Fire that is not drunk: The Spirit is in Your Bread, the Fire in Your Wine, a manifest wonder, that our lips have received.” (Faith 10:8) Cf. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 104.

³⁷ Cf. R. Aravackal, “The Glorious Imagery of ‘Pearl’ (*Marganita*) in the Writings of St Ephrem” in *Ephrem’s Theological Journal* XXV/1&2 (2021) 22.

³⁸ Cf. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 106.

³⁹ “It was the very same Christ in the Upper Room, who gave and was distributed to all.” Cf. S. Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of Saint Ephrem*, 102.

⁴⁰ G. Francis, “Paschal Promises for a Persecuted People; Eucharistic Perspectives for a Persecuted Church,” in G. Francis (ed.), *Body, Bread, Blood: Eucharistic Perspectives from the Indian Church* (Delhi: Vidyajyoti/ISPCK, 2003) 239.

⁴¹ Aprem, *Mar Aprem, Theologian & Poet*, 68.



with the use of symbols and at the same time the people were influenced by the heretic teachings, as explained. This means that the people were influenced or confused by the false interpretation of the teachings on faith spread by the heretic teachers of the time. To fight against these heretic use of the symbols to interpret divine mysteries, St. Ephrem gives maximum possible clarification to the Catholic teachings on the economy of salvation by incorporating the Old Testament events from the post-resurrection perspective by making use of allusive language. He tried to elevate the faith of the people to the right track. As a zealous missionary, he wanted to protect the faith of the people. Therefore, he used the symbols and imageries familiar to the people and it enabled him to express the actual teachings of the Christian faith. At the same time, it cannot be neglected that the political situation was also not favorable to him in expressing theology directly because Christians were under persecution in the Persian Empire at his time and even later.

This academic paper clarifies that theology is the response of the time to the Faith seeking of the people. Therefore, the language of the theology is decided by the context in which it is introduced. That means all the liturgical or theological language makes a different TL. It is based on how one is exposed to the context. Therefore, the proper knowledge is very significant in the semantic shift (transcendental leap). Thus, the transcendental leap of the imagery is highly dependent on the context as we see in the academic article “An Introduction to the Transcendental Leap.”

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