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A parable to begin, or, more accurately, an anecdote, which is a composite of a host of conversations of a type likely familiar to readers of *The Bible and Critical Theory*. At a conference reception, chatting with colleagues whom I see, at best, annually, the conversation turns to what we are reading. I mention Breton’s book on Paul to blank faces, even among the Pauline scholars; I am asked who Breton is (and where he teaches, and where and with whom he studied – the triune markers of one’s ideology and trajectory of disciplinary *cursus honorum*). I explain gently that Breton taught (past tense; he died in 2005) at the École Normale Supérieure, my monstrous French audibly reminding me to remain humble. I elaborate to empty expressions, noting his prominence as a French intellectual in an age of giant contemporaries; no small feat. I place him among other continental philosophers interested in Paul: Taubes, Badiou, Agamben. At last, a slight glimmer of recognition at “Agamben” precedes a turning away of the face, back to a neglected plate of cheese and fruit, the conversation now less interesting than watery cantaloupe and the concentration required for impaling cubes of decent-but-ordinary cheddar. Another voice nearby: “So, you’re moving beyond Biblical Studies?” No. “But, isn’t Agamben (note: Breton is now, again, forgotten) a philosopher and not a biblical critic (alas, too often, for ‘critic’ read: ‘scholar’)?”

**What has Paris to do with Antioch?**

I would be clear: I do not offer this parable as yet another lament at the isolation of non-historical and atheological approaches to biblical criticism. I have made this lament in the past; I don’t any longer. It is difficult to sustain. “Alternative” approaches to biblical criticism have earned a host of serious, significant, and intellectually recognized venues in monograph series, peer-reviewed journals, conference sub-sections, and more. To be sure, these were hard fought recognitions. Yet, to be equally honest, they mark battles now largely conceded. (A)historical ways of reading the Bible are recognized as “real” (if not always valued equally by all scholars; but what is?). Biblical Studies does remain bifurcated in interest and methodology. Fair enough; in a sense, this dissonance is fundamental to the haunting beauty of the field, revealing the complexity of our text(s). Yet, traditional approaches to biblical studies too often neglect insight garnered from more contemporary readings, even as newer directions of critique often float asea, unmoored by attention to the groundwork established by others. I am reminded, as a metaphor, of once watching bored teenagers, eyes down, thumbs awhirl, text-messaging on a Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, street corner, waiting for the passing traffic of Amish wagons to clear the road. You two should talk.

Biblical scholarship, as is often noted, tends towards a self-representation that presents the scholar as the unique voice of insight, a trope or meme likely arising from the very norms of the literature itself (the prophetic voice, the lone and misunderstood apostle). I offer this review, then, as an appeal, sitting as I do between two spheres, trained by both Evangelicals and Poststructuralists, an emissary (“apostle” seems too grandiose and intentional a word, even to me) to the classically trained, first, but also to the general intellectual. To be a traditional Pauline Critic in our guild requires not only a specific sub-set of professional skills, but even prescribes the questions one may
invoke. If nothing else, Breton’s critiques of Paul begin the demolition of these categories, inviting conversation that challenges assertions of the impassible gulf fixed between philology, historical inquiry, theology, and continental philosophy.

Certainly one benefit of Breton (alongside Paul’s other recent continental philosophy admirers) is the renewed interest in Paul’s ideas as, themselves, ideas. Breton offers an invitation to see Paul not as a record for historians or theologians, but as a producer of ideas, of philosophical insight, as one among a host of contemporaries. As such, Breton facilitates the recognition and comparison of Pauline ideas within a new typological frame: as potential (timeless and ideologically aloof) points of argument addressing a host of philosophical questions, current and referential, invoking history as a context of discussion, noting, as all conversation must, continuity and referentiality, yet not content merely to (re)articulate what was once said (or to perhaps speculate about why it was said at all).

This, of course, is a very different way of reading Paul than biblical scholarship has typically pursued. The question of anachronism is not even substantively addressed in Breton; historical development is largely ignored (or, better, a rudimentary and highly conventional historical locus for Paul is assumed, primarily to serve as a foundation or gem-setting for his argument, then ignored as attention turns toward the ideas and arguments themselves). Conventional Pauline criticism will likely not value much of what is written here, given that Breton is rather uninterested in locating his arguments in conventional Pauline debates, as well as the somewhat rabid tendency of Pauline historical critics to isolate themselves from the influence of “theology” or scholarship (note, for example, the legion of biographies of Paul, most of which, in their prefaces, sniff disdainfully at the influence of “theological” readings or prior interpretation of Paul and avow that as authors they have instead burrowed deeply into – the Greek – text of Paul for themselves). This is a pity.

Consider, for example, the truly elegant potential of wedding traditional scholarship on the “kenotic hymn” of Philippians 2 with late 20th century philosophical philology and ontology, particularly that of Breton. Historians rightly conclude Philippians 2 invokes key themes of Jewish cosmology, Greco-Roman religion (particularly themes of the “dying and rising” deity from Egyptian and Greek mythology), and the realities of colonial existence and the subaltern yearning for recognized space. Breton invites us to consider this hymn alongside poststructuralist notions of language and ontology; “being” is vacuous, negative. What “is” can only be identified via what “is not”. Breton reminds us that the limits of subjectivity define its contents. In Philippians 2, Paul outlines (appropriating prior communally-composed ideology?) a model of “God” (in the sense of Platonic thought, the “ground of all being”) that becomes nothing/not-being (ceases, in other words, to be “God”) precisely via becoming something tangible via incarnation. Equality with God is given up to become incarnate; the infinite (by definition “God”) which is, philosophically, everything that it is, becomes in essence, nothing, by becoming real and specific, becoming actual even as it loses its essence of totality, rendering it ontologically no longer everything-at-once. This now-incarnate Something is the result of a transition that involved emptying Godself of Everything; vacuity results in substance; God becomes the Christ. This Christ then empties himself and abases himself in turn, yielding as a slave to death, resulting, yet again, in ontological emptiness and erasure which results in glorification back into the infinite. Rather cleverly, Breton provides the potential to locate the ideas of a Derrida-esque grammaticology within Paul’s Christology, highlighting the irony and ineffability of thinking and speaking about thinking and speaking while also dramatizing on a cosmic (and yet also specific, individualized) scale the tensions between meaning and not meaning, the complex violation of binary notions of ontology and lexicography, of rhetoric and reality. For Breton, this equation both is and is not theological and metaphorical, allegorical and parabolic, philosophical and actual.

A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul, as an introduction to Breton’s thought, offers two helpful assets. First, it is, of course, the first English translation of Breton’s Saint Paul (a translation, by Joseph Ballan, that is oriented more toward accessibility than absolute, literal precision). Second, it
opens with an overview essay by Ward Blanton (chief apostle of Breton among English-speaking critics) of Breton’s work, as a whole, and how these themes appear in Radical Philosophy. Blanton’s essay, significant in its own terms, is cogent, precise, well-selected and a good orientation to the philosophical importance of the work as a whole; it is not, however, as lucid in prose as one might hope for a beginner’s primer to Breton. New readers and those unfamiliar with themes of late-twentieth century French philosophy may find it tough going. I recommend such readers begin first with Breton, himself, then return to Ward (the opposite sequence for those already initiated into the arcana of developing poststructuralist thought).

Blanton identifies a series of significant landmarks in Breton (particularly evident in his work on Paul). First, he clarifies that Breton is, above all, a philosophical reader of Paul, and not an historian. There is some truth in this. Breton reads Acts as a legitimate source of Pauline biography, treats accepted and disputed epistles (even Hebrews) as equal representatives of Pauline thought, frequently engages Pauline ideas alongside Johannine literature, and rarely invokes the norms or culture of the Greco-Roman world. These tendencies are anathema to many historical-grammatical readers of Paul. The imagination shudders at the thought of what sort of review of Breton might be written, say, by a reincarnated F. C. Baur. Yet arguments that Breton neglects history are overdrawn. Breton opens his book with a sketch of Pauline biography. He assumes a (fairly standard) reconstruction of Pauline chronology. He addresses substantial questions found in the study of Christian origins (the relationship of Jewish and Gentile believers, the evolution of Christian thought vis-à-vis Roman social and political pressures and intra-Jewish debates, the development of allegory, etc.). My own critique, here, of Blanton could be overstated. He writes: “Breton is no historian of Paul, but I wish all historians could teach us so much, and so efficiently, about the intractably politico-theological history of Western thought” (p. 10). I agree.

Blanton concentrates his introduction on establishing Breton’s broader interest. Though nowhere near the authority on the subject that Blanton has become, I very much agree with his outline. To my sense, Breton’s major interests are very much directed toward the analysis of ontology and epistemology (and their mutual and necessary intersections), arising from Breton’s interest in mathematics (versus Derridean structures rooted in philology and lexicography). He also clarifies the “ground rules” of Bretonian critique. We can not imagine an “is” without first imagining and articulating what “is not”. Paul focuses on the negation of the self via identification with Christ, establishing Breton’s notion of objectivity: “being itself ... is ‘meontological,’ that is not (me-)ontological a science of self-grounding identity” (p. 16). In Breton’s Paul, kenosis has constructive, productive value (indeed, it may be the only means of production), illustrating Paul’s fixation with “heavenly” ways of logic which are found absurd to human or “worldly” logics, of emptying oneself to find oneself, of death as the means to life. Transcendence is established or achieved by erasure. For Blanton’s Breton, the crux of these various energies and strategies is, very literally, the cross itself.

One final critique of Blanton might be that his introductory essay misses the opportunity to work alongside Ballan and “translate” Breton into the language of conventional Pauline scholarship in explicit terms. For example, Breton’s readings of Paul articulate the significance of “Pauline thought”, encompassing the whole of both recognized and deutero-Pauline literature, as a literary unit shaping and shaped by nascent Christianity (as I have exemplified, above, in my remarks on Philippians 2). As noted above, Breton locates Pauline christology in the conversation on the intersection of philosophical ontology and epistemology, an argument articulated by Paul using the language of theology and myth. Breton speaks to the notorious problems of Pauline binary – law/grace, JewGreek/GreekJew, Christophilic Pharisee, absent and eschewed voice of apostolic authority – with elegance, noting that the tensions between “is” and “is not” are often superimposed. Breton’s insight into Pauline allegory as pan-historic appropriation of text, as creative play, sheds important light onto Paul’s somewhat troubled and often strained exegesis of Hebrew Scripture. These are
valuable “pay offs” for reading Paul and should be incorporated into “conventional” Pauline scholarship. There seems to me to be rather rich potential, as well, in applying these ideas in particular to Pauline structures of gender and developing subjectivity.

Turning to Breton himself: the book is structured as six chapters with a preface. Each chapter is largely intact and somewhat stand-alone, though the ideas advanced in each certainly also build to a single point. A reader of Breton must become comfortable with the productive value of contradiction. In the first paragraph of his preface, Breton declares he is not an historian and that “in responding to Paul’s writings we will rely on the competence of neither scholarly exegesis nor theology” (p. 33). Before the page is finished, however, it is clear that non-reliance does not at all mean avoidance; Breton immediately begins tracing a grounding biography of Paul which is aware of (and speaks to) issues of pseudepigraphy, traditional (largely Lutheran-influenced) themes of Pauline theology, and the historical veracity of Acts. He declares that his work is “intended for philosophers, less concerned with the authenticity of a signature than with the authenticity of a thought” (p. 35). Still, does one begin an analysis of Plato by establishing the context of Athenian social norms during the Peloponnesian war, or by addressing the tensions between Platonic and Socratic voice and textual history? Not often. It is clear that what Breton means by a work intended for philosophers not exegetes or historians is a work that uses historical context and exegesis when necessary for Breton’s particular purpose, but abandons them when not.

This tendency is on magisterial display in chapter one, “Biographical Outline”. Breton traces an outline of Pauline biography that would make historians cringe a bit at the caricatures of James and Peter (though noting the tensions between Paul and “Judaizers”, whoever they may be, is certainly valid). Breton accepts other somewhat dubious claims – for example, that Paul was a Roman citizen by birth. He sees Paul reflecting Johanne notions (particularly the “I am” language of the Fourth Gospel). Yet he nicely notes the discrepancies in language for the Pauline “conversion” stories, as well as the complex array of issues surrounding any idea of “conversion” at all in Paul.

Breton’s biography is a fairly conventional one, in the end, though arraigned in pretty ways. The central tension is Paul’s seeming-but-not-complete duality, his productive contradiction. Breton’s Paul is between Jew, Roman, and Greek. Paul, as apostle, is between God and human, even as he is, in office, productively both/Neither teacher and apostle. Paul exists in his letters between his former and present self/selves. He is between positions of rejection and inclusion of Jews and Gentiles alike into the new faith. Paul is fundamentally a traveller, yet he only/always exists in community. The ambivalence of a Pauline “I am” is the ambivalence of actuality and vacuity. Breton’s Paul is interstitial to the core in his celebration of Jesus, the interstitial space between the divine and the human. For Breton, Paul is anticipating (productive) poststructuralist negative ontology in his every word and deed.

Chapter two, “Hermeneutics and Allegory”, addresses Paul’s exegesis of Hebrew Scripture. Rhetoric – particularly the biblically-informed rhetoric of exegesis – is the modus operandi of Paul’s productive tension, and allegory is his chief technique. Breton sees allegory as simultaneously productive and critical. It articulates the “is” by remaking the text (an “is not”) into an algorithm or heuristic with particular attention to trans-historical ontology. For example, Breton sees two movements inherent in christology and incarnation. In the Incarnation, the Divine enters actual history (Breton sees this in Ephesians 1:9-12). But, via the significance (literally) of history (Scripture), Jesus is known as Divine (Breton uses Hebrews 1:1-3). The Incarnation verifies Scripture which, in turn, clarifies and authorizes the Incarnation (pp. 57-61). Each legitimates, but also depends upon, the other. For Breton, this is the essence of allegorical exegesis and Pauline hermeneutics. Allegory becomes the preservation of, as well as the construction of, memory. It is an ahistorical means of bringing together the horizons of past, present, and future (a means which has, as its hinge, Jesus’ crucifixion as Messiah). Paul develops allegorical readings of Scripture as a means of understanding and signifying (in a Derridean sense) the present, bringing the past forward and the
future backward. Both time and eternity become, as a whole, accessible in the punctual aorist present of reading.

In chapter three, “Jesus the Christ”, Breton finally gets down to the nub of Pauline Christology. Paul uses his language of Jesus’ Incarnation, death, and glorification as the solder to weld, productively, his tensions of subjectivity and time. To the former, Paul addresses questions of Jew-Gentile forms of relating to Jesus. Breton (correctly) rejects the facile tension between Law and Grace found by some in Paul. Jewish ritual was Grace-driven (by election if nothing else); Pauline Christology most certainly compels and restricts human actions and responses. Breton rejects arguments that Jewish Law was mere ritual. He also does not agree that Paul’s love of Jesus was a simple revolt against a spiritually dead Pharisaism (p. 87). Instead, Breton sees Paul’s concern with Law (generically) as the problematic fusion of an essential ideal (“behind” the Law) and (often unproductive) tensions surrounding the actual presence of legal restriction itself. The latter overwhelms the former and makes it too grossly particular, to the degree that it renders the former ineffective. Finally, Law is bound in the particularity of the present. “True Jews” should grow beyond the Law, which renders the Law – intended as the productive means to God – as less relevant, at best inhibitive, and at worst exclusionary. Much as epistemology (language?) both actualizes and diminishes ontology (in Paul’s case, “God”), Law enables but also excludes. Paul’s solution (derived, Breton concedes, from his own visions of Jesus, articulated best in Galatians and Romans) is to turn toward Christology. In this expression, Paul sees (established via the principles of allegory) the unification of phases of ontology and time: Scripture becomes reality which is defended and understood via Scripture. The phrase “Jesus the Christ” unites, in Breton’s Paul: divinity becomes particular, history becomes present and future, Scripture/rhetoric become actual, and the servant becomes Lord. Jesus, as both incarnate God and crucified Messiah becomes “Lord”, knitting together subject and predicate.

Chapter four, “The Pauline Cosmos”, is, to my mind, the most bland in argument. Breton argues that Paul agrees with other nascent Christian thinkers (again, comparison is made to John) that there is a dualism of sorts between the physical (flawed, imperfect, tending toward corruption) and the divine cosmos. Jesus both knits these worlds and passes judgment upon/purifies the physical realm (presently and in the eschaton). Pauline cosmology is more nuanced, however. Creation can, in some ways, be a threat. The existing order of things is being changed. But Breton stresses that the act of creation is both the location of, and the opportunity for, divine activity. Accordingly, it is (and has potential for) Good. Through exegesis of Colossians 1:15-20 and Romans 8:19-25, Breton outlines Pauline cosmology. In a Pauline cosmos, humans, other life forms, and even the physical universe suffer — and succeed — together. Jesus is kyrios and hope for the entire cosmos. Breton argues that Paul’s christology is rooted in Genesis 1. He observes that, through Christ, the imperatives of Genesis become indicatives (p. 98). In Pauline cosmology, Sin and Death are cosmic “powers”, agencies that act wilful in the universe to thwart God’s design and will. As Breton reads Paul, nature, history, cosmos, and church all unite in salvation history. As one can see, these are generally received ideas. To his credit, Breton worries that he is becoming boring to the reader (p. 117); unfortunately, this concern doesn’t stop the chapter’s relentless progress in exactly that direction.

Breton rightly notes the potential of a Pauline cosmology for current ecological discussion, yet (also rightly) notes that this conversation is anachronistic (p. 100). I agree, but I’m not certain why Breton suddenly becomes concerned about anachronism here, nor why, granted that the idea is anachronistic to Paul’s interests, it cannot be explored as a natural outgrowth or implication of Paul’s thinking. Breton turns at the end of the chapter toward a possible linkage of Pauline cosmology, and its integral use of the potentiality of Hope, to German philosophical discussion of phenomenology in/and Nature, particularly as represented in the German Romantic philosopher F. W. J. Schelling, and also Teilhard de Chardin, but he does not really develop these ideas. Breton also offers one of
his most potentially exciting arguments in his exegesis of Roman 8. Briefly re-invoking Gen. 1 and
divine creation by ordering chaos, Breton hints at the possibility that, like humans (called by God into
being a people with laws), Creation was a once primal energy now forced into order (or “Law”) by
divine imperative. This order is potentially productive, but also presently restrictive and diminishing.
Order requires a simultaneous destruction of potentiality (Freedom). Accordingly, like humans,
Creation groans for release from the bondage of Law. Breton writes:

[T]he laws to which nature is subjected imply an original violence, itself indissociable ... from a “fallen state” ... and from its inevitable consequences, to wit, “corruption” and
“death”. This is a bizarre hermeneutic, which would not hesitate to make of the Newtonian
law of gravitation the symbol of a universal fall or “decline”, correlative, by contrast, with a
primitive, lawless innocence of nature (pp. 118-119).

This is clearly the most interesting and original idea in the chapter, yet Breton abandons it after a
few sentences, declaring that “it is clearly more reasonable to follow an exegetical path less likely to
result in altitude sickness” (p. 119). Aghast that he so quickly dropped so amazing a line of thought,
dismayed that he gives up the summit before I am even able, hands encumbered from excitement,
to finish frantically getting crampons strapped to my boots, I settled in for the dutiful hike to a rather
bland resolution of the chapter, still looking backward and upward with regret. The effect of
disappointment here, however, somewhat illustrates his arguments about control and Law imposed
upon freedom.

“The Church According to Saint Paul”, chapter five, restored my interest. Expecting yet another
(bland-tasting) serving of the flavors of Calling infused into the word *ecclesia*, Breton opens in an
unexpected way, focusing on fellowship and communion. Some wooden treatment of the latter
term can be excused, given Breton’s ultimate focus. Moving from community/communion (resting on
fresh analysis of Pauline use of prepositions) Breton turns next to issues of loyalty and hierarchy,
beginning with the relationship of the Church to Jesus and moving to the Pauline fascination with
order, doctrine, and control. The famous interest of Paul in Grace often obscures substantial
elements of regulation and discipline found in Paul. Breton does not make this mistake but remains
focused on the Pauline obsession with control and hierarchy. Paul does value diversity and is, to a
degree, egalitarian, but Breton rightly observes that Paul also argues for strict models of internal
hierarchy and authority (beginning with God and Jesus, moving through the apostolate, resulting —
in later traditions — in explicit ecclesiastical offices. Breton notes (depending very much on the
Corinthian letters) that Paul regulates sexual mores, marital relations, domestic order, dress, sexual
preference, food, and liturgy. Establishing a renewed attention to Pauline structures of authority,
Breton finally addresses calling and mystical union. The profit here is the intellectual union of what
are often seen as divergent trends in Paul. Traditional Pauline theology has often noted an emphasis
in Paul on divine (gracious) calling of believers into a new community. Many gender-focused
(feminist) and politically-oriented (postcolonial) scholars have also noted fairly conventional (and
socially conservative) systems and structures of social hierarchy in the Pauline letters. Breton’s
reading unites these streams.

The final chapter, “The Cross of Christ”, generally summarizes Breton’s themes on Paul. Breton
returns to his affirmation that Paul’s thought is fundamentally christic, expanding the idea to note
the centrality of crucifixion and its logic (better, its anti-logic) as the locus and intersection of all the
themes he has treated thus far. Breton notes Paul’s focus on “divine logic”, using 1 Corinthians 1:22-
25 to establish how this is different from traditionally defined “Greek” (i.e., “sapiential” or logic-
based) and “Jewish” (read: prayerful, mystic, liturgical modes of thinking) approaches to
epistemology. Indeed, the borders of epistemology and theology are frequently blurred in Breton’s
Paul; in many ways, Paul is actually working out the former using the rhetoric of the latter. Breton
finally turns to the productive value of kenosis, focusing on Philippians 2, 1 Corinthians 2, and
Romans. Breton’s organizing idea is that “the paradox, if there is one, is the coincidence of a mad
love and another folly, also divine, which strips that love of its too-human resonances or consolations” (p. 143). What we find instead is the productive value of erasure and dissolution of binaries (i.e., a poststructuralist Paul). Breton writes:

The cross cannot but be folly for Greeks and scandal for Jews. The proclaimed word or message can be interpreted neither according to a Greek expression nor according to terms of the old Covenant. Now these are the only alternative possibilities available to discourse. Since Paul refuses them, in the present case as in good logic, the negation of the disjunction is equivalent to the conjunction of two negations (p. 145).

Breton closes with a rather quiet reflection on what he sees as core to Pauline thinking. Citing a statement of Jesus found only in traditions associated with Paul (in the immediate case, Acts 20:34-38): “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (pp. 153-154).

Has Breton added something to Pauline scholarship not otherwise present? I must admit: not really. His most exciting ideas, in substance, have been anticipated by other readers of Paul – from Pseudo-Dionysius (particularly his “negative theology”) to Daniel Boyarin. Yet, in another sense, I can’t escape how idiosyncratic such a question is. Pauline scholars seem uniquely obsessed with uniqueness in critique or argument. Does it really matter if one’s arguments are influenced by prior scholarship (indeed, in most fields, isn’t this the sine qua non)? Must one be completely unique (again, in most fields, this is something of a demerit). Breton does assist in blending poststructuralism and Pauline ideas. Agamben and Taubes, despite being regarded as “postmodern” or “deconstructive” by a host of Pauline scholars, are in no way poststructuralists. Agamben, for mercy’s sake, is a Marxist. Breton is often identified as a political philosopher, focused on Marxist readings, himself. In this volume, however, I simply do not see this focus. True, Breton is addressing communal identity, the formation of subjectivity, hierarchy, and the relationship of all these to ontology and epistemology. Call me old fashioned, but I like my Marxism served with at least some attention to commodification, labour, production, or economics. None of these themes is present in Breton’s work on Paul.

What does emerge is extremely interesting for both scholars of Breton and scholars of Paul. Breton constructs a central thesis of Paul which is, I would argue, poststructuralist to the core. Breton’s Paul consistently collapses binaries, refusing “either/or” constructions and finding the process of negation intensely productive. Binaries are epistemologies forced onto a resistant ontology. The collapse of these binaries produces tensions which expand reality and ontology exactly by their falsehood and negation. Breton’s arguments bring this conversation forcefully and deliberately into the language of theology and biblical exegesis. For scholars of continental philosophy, Breton is arguably the source of later continental interest in religion generally, and Paul in particular. Further, the volume provides a glimpse at a decidedly poststructuralist side to Breton’s thinking.

Short, but densely written and argued (it is not, by any means, open to rapid or superficial reading), A Radical Philosophy of Saint Paul is of real value to both traditional and methodologically-progressive scholars of Paul and, equally, to specialists in late twentieth-century continental philosophy. If there is any justice, the volume will also be useful in facilitating conversation among these often disparate groups.

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