

The Abrahamic Fallacy

by Mark Durie (February 2014)

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Introduction

The Abrahamic Fallacy is the belief that Abraham is a figure of unity for Islam, Christianity and Judaism.

The phrase “Abrahamic Religions” has become very popular as a cover-term for these three faiths. It is particularly popular among Jewish and Christian progressives on the one hand, and Muslim apologists on the other. The term implies a kind of unity or brotherhood across the three faiths.

More broadly, the term “Abrahamic religions” has become the standard term, both in comparative religions and popular parlance, to refer to the three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, in contrast, for example, to Indian religions and East Asian religions.

In essence the claim embodied by the expression is that Abraham is “shared” as a point of common origin by all three monotheistic religions, and naming him as their shared identity is meant to signal that these three faiths are linked together in some kind of theological continuity.

The expression is in fact used in a variety of ways. Adam Dodds points out that for some, it is simply a cover term for the grouping of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, a kind of functional shorthand without any intended theological content. Others – perhaps the majority of writers – use the phrase to imply some degree of “historical and theological commonality,” perhaps unspecified. For still others the term implies an intimate unity, namely that it is

one and the same God who has authored the Bible and the Qur'an, and the same eternal message is presented in both books.

But is the construct of "Abrahamic religion" helpful, or quite the opposite, a bad idea? And specifically, is the multi-faith Abraham the same person found in the pages of the Torah, or is he merely a product of wishful thinking?

Abraham in Genesis: Judaism and Christianity

To be sure, Christianity and Judaism do have the Abraham of Genesis in common. This is the Abraham of covenant and promise, the "father of many," and specifically "father" or "patriarch" of Israel. The Abraham of the Bible is a symbol of God's benevolence to the nations.

No model of moral perfection, the Abraham of Genesis is nevertheless also the prototype or forerunner for Israel of someone in intimate, personal, covenantal relationship with God, a state to which the Hebrew scriptures testify on almost every page.

While the overlap between Judaism and Christianity in their appreciation of Abraham – embodied in the Genesis account – is profound, there are important differences in how these two faiths understand Abraham. Neither Judaism nor Christianity is content to read Abraham solely through the lens of Genesis.

For Christians it is Paul who frames Abraham, casting him as someone justified by faith: "For Abraham believed and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:22, Genesis 15:6). Thus the Pauline Abraham might be considered as the prototype of a de-Judaized, Gentile Christian liberated from the shackles of the rabbinical Law.

While for Jews Abraham's paternity is through literal descent, Christians consider themselves to be Abraham's children "by faith," following Paul who calls Abraham the "father of all who believe" (Romans 4:16). This involves a new lineage for Gentiles, or as Paula Frederikson put it, "Christians are children of Abraham, but not from Isaac and Jacob."

On the other hand, Jews read Abraham through the Oral Traditions (the Talmud), which portray him as an idol-destroying monotheist, and a forerunner of Torah observance.

A story recorded in a Jewish midrash tells of how the young Abram smashed his father's idols, and then told his father that the one remaining idol had attacked and destroyed all the others. The father disagreed, saying that the idol was only a statue, thus validating Abram's contention that his father's idols were no gods at all.

This story is not found in the Bible. In reality there is nothing in Genesis that unambiguously portrays Abraham as an exclusive monotheist or opposed to idol worship. To be sure, there is an implication in Genesis 18:19 that Abraham walked in accordance with God's laws – which implies rejection of idolatry:

For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.

Here Genesis states that God has chosen Abraham for the purpose of establishing his generations to do "what is right and just" as a part of a covenantal relationship. However what cannot be deduced from Genesis is that Abraham actually lived out this commission in an exemplary way, nor that this involved an explicit rejection of idolatry. (The first time the theme of rejection of idolatry crops up in Genesis is when Abraham's grandson Jacob tells his household in Genesis 35:2, "Get rid of the foreign gods you have with you, and purify yourselves and change your clothes.")

In Joshua 24:2-3 it is implied that Abraham was chosen by God out from the religious context of his idol-worshipping father, Terah – implying that Abraham made a break with this practice – but here again, it is not stated explicitly that Abraham renounced idol worship. Indeed there is no reference to idols or other "gods" in the Abraham story.

Moreover there is no code of conduct, which might be called a "law," described in connection with the Abraham of Genesis. In God's engagement with Abraham in Genesis, there is no impartation of a system of ethics. What is there is covenantal relationship: favour, promise and references to Abraham's faith and his notable acts of obedience (e.g. Genesis 12:4, 15:6, 22). The only regulation reported for Abraham's religion, apart from the Lord being his family's god, was the custom of circumcising males (Genesis 17:13), instituted as a sign of covenant faithfulness.

Although there is nothing explicit in Genesis which portrays Abraham as opposed to idols, what is of great relevance, in contrast to the competing idol worship of the surrounding nations, is the incident of the binding of Abraham's son Isaac, in which God intervened to spare Isaac and symbolically put an end to child sacrifice, replacing this with the sacrifice of an animal instead. This act anticipates the instruction in the Law of Moses that Israelites had to "redeem" a firstborn son through an animal sacrifice (Exodus 22:29, 34:19-20).

Later of course, for Christian theology, the story comes full circle when God replaces temple sacrifices of animals with the offering of his only Son, Jesus, on the very same mountain,

Moriah, where Abraham attempted to sacrifice Isaac.

The binding of Isaac

The *Akedah*, or binding of Isaac, was important in defining the distinct identity of the Israelites. The Hebrews were culturally closely related to the surrounding Canaanites, and linguistically virtually indistinguishable from them. Hebrew is classified as a Canaanite language (others were Phoenician, Ammonite, Moabite and Edomite). Ancient Canaanite religion is well known for the practice of child sacrifice. The *Akedah* account of the interrupted sacrifice of Isaac – and the subsequent practice of redeeming the firstborn son – set the Israelites apart from their Canaanite neighbours, and elevated the worship of the God of Abraham above that of Molech, who welcomed human sacrifice.

The practice of child sacrifice was at certain times also a Hebrew practice, an issue which much concerned the prophets (Jeremiah 19:4-5; Ezekiel 16:20-21). This practice continued among the Israelites right up until the Babylonian exile and was one of the reasons for it (Psalm 106:37-39). Solomon himself built a temple to Molech, and this was only torn down in the reforms of Josiah (2 Kings 23:13).

God's intervention in the *Akedah* could be regarded as an anti-idolatry polemic (against Canaanite child-sacrifice practices). But if so, this is an indirect reference to idolatry, and apart from this, Genesis offers us little evidence to regard Abraham as a model monotheist. A follower of God, yes; a trenchant anti-idolator, no.

So, in summary, Christianity and Judaism share the Abraham of covenant, the father of many and patriarch of the nation of Israel.

A divisive figure

Despite the shared Biblical narrative, Abraham remains a divisive figure between the two Biblical faiths, because for the Jews he is the very model of a Torah-observant Jew – a perspective which is not so much Biblical as Talmudic; but for Christians he is the man saved by faith, a figure who stands opposed to continuing Jewish adherence to the Torah – a perspective which is based more on Paul than on Genesis.

There are of course tensions even in Paul's view of Abraham and his children the Jews in general. On the one hand Paul extols Jewish identity, and affirms the promises of God to the Jews as irrevocable (Romans 11:28-29). On the other hand, Paul castigates Jews for holding on to the Torah in opposition – as he saw it – to salvation by faith, and for seeking to impose

the Torah upon Gentile believers. It is not, he asserts, “the children of the flesh” who are the children of God, but the “children of the promise” (Romans 9:8). The legacy of Abraham is received by faith, not by adherence to the law (Romans 4:13): “For if those who depend on the law are heirs, faith means nothing and the promise is worthless” (Romans 4:14).

While both Christianity and Judaism accept the Bible’s narrative that the promise was passed on through Isaac (and not the older son Ishmael), the idea that the children of Israel, Abraham’s grandson, are the people of God’s promise has proved a stumbling block to Gentile Christianity. Often Christianity has adopted a supersessionist theology which dispenses with God’s covenant to the Jews, appropriating the title “people of God” to Gentile Christianity, and displacing the Jews as the beneficiaries of God’s promises to Abraham. This was already a theme of early Christian thought: Paul’s Abraham of faith was used as a kind of stick for beating Jews over the head. In this way Abraham has become a core point of contention and division between Jews and Christians.

Abraham in the Quran

The later Jewish view of Abraham as the idol-destroying monotheist developed in extra-biblical Jewish traditions. From there it passed over – along with fragments of other Jewish traditions – into the Quran. However, although this is a link between the Abraham of Jewish tradition and the “Ibrahim” of the Quran, the Quran’s overall take on Abraham diverges considerably from that of Genesis. The word *appropriation* rather than *inheritance* is apposite. Ibrahim of the Quran is a very different figure from Abraham, the “father of many” of Genesis: his function in theological history and his relationship with God is very differently understood.

What does the Quran have to say about Abraham?

A great deal. There are 69 verses in the Quran which mention Abraham by name: he is the second most frequently mentioned Biblical figure after Moses. Like other Biblical references found in the Quran, this material appears to allude to Jewish traditions circulating in the 7th century AD. The references do not show signs of being directly shaped or even influenced to any degree by someone who was directly familiar with the text of Genesis.

Abraham is a figure alluded to repeatedly throughout the Quran. Unlike the Bible, the Quran normally does not have one specific section devoted to telling the story of individuals – such as Genesis 12-25 which deals with Abraham – but instead treats them allusively, making multiple references, some of which are fragments of narratives, presented in a way which implies that the reader is already familiar with the content of the story.

There are allusions in the Quran to some Biblical stories connected to Abraham. For example there are various references to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (e.g. Sura 26:160ff) and to the visit of the angels to establish a covenant (e.g. Sura 11:69-73). There are also extra-biblical stories taken from Jewish tradition such as the Talmudic narratives of Abraham's destruction of his father's idols (Sura 21:58) and being thrown into a fiery furnace, a trial he survived by the miraculous intervention of God (Sura 21:68-70).

Throughout these scattered references, Abraham is presented as one in a long line of prophets of Islam: Ibrahim of the Quran is prophet of Islam, a model monotheist and opponent of idol worship. Some of the key points are as follows:

"He hath named you Muslims"

Abraham is the one who gave the name *Muslims* to Allah's followers:

And strive for Allah with the endeavour which is His right. He hath chosen you and hath not laid upon you in religion any hardship; the faith of your father Abraham (is yours). He hath named you Muslims of old time and in this (Scripture), that the messenger may be a witness against you, and that ye may be witnesses against mankind. So establish worship, pay the poor-due, and hold fast to Allah. He is your Protecting friend. A blessed Patron and a blessed Helper! (Sura 22:78 – Pickthall)

One true religion

Abraham taught the same religion brought by Muhammad, the religion of Moses, Noah and Jesus:

He hath ordained for you that religion which He commended unto Noah, and that which We inspire in thee (Muhammad), and that which We commended unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus, saying: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein. Dreadful for the idolaters is that unto which thou callest them. Allah chooseth for Himself whom He will, and guideth unto Himself him who turneth (toward Him). (Sura 42:13)

Abraham had a book

Abraham, consistent with Muhammad's understanding of "prophets" and just like Muhammad, had a "book" from God like that of Moses (*i.e.* like the Torah).

You prefer the life of this world, but the hereafter is better and more enduring. And this is in the Books of the earliest (revelations) – the Books of Abraham and Moses. (Sura 87:16-19 Yusuf Ali)

Or are they jealous of mankind because of that which Allah of His bounty hath bestowed upon them? For We bestowed upon the house of Abraham (of old) the Scripture and wisdom, and We bestowed on them a mighty kingdom. (Sura 4:54; see also 19:41)

A model imam

Instead of calling Abraham “father of nations”, the Quran describes him as the imam or “leader” of nations (Sura 2:124), and from his line other “leaders” will come (including Muhammad). Thus instead of Abraham being a blessing to the nations, he is a forerunner and model for future “leaders”, and ultimately for Muhammad. This is reinforced by tracing him as an ancestor of Muhammad by the line of Ishmael.

Abraham in the Quran adheres to core Islamic doctrines such as belief in Judgement Day (Sura 2:126), which was anachronistic for Genesis: in the Bible, this belief is only introduced much later, by the prophets.

A model of hostility and hatred

Strikingly, Abraham of the Quran also adheres to the same doctrine Muhammad taught of hatred and enmity to unbelievers:

There is a goodly pattern for you in Abraham and those with him, when they told their folk: Lo! we are guiltless of you and all that ye worship beside Allah. We have done with you. And there hath arisen between us and you hostility and hate for ever until ye believe in Allah only – save that which Abraham promised his father (when he said): I will ask forgiveness for thee, though I own nothing for thee from Allah – Our Lord! In Thee we put our trust, and unto Thee we turn repentant, and unto Thee is the journeying. (Sura 60:4)

Mecca and Ishmael

A distinctive of Abraham in the Quran is the report that he and his son Ishmael built the Kaaba in Mecca and established it as a place of worship for Allah:

And when We made the House (at Makka) a resort for mankind and sanctuary, (saying): Take as your place of worship the place where Abraham stood (to pray). And We imposed a duty upon Abraham and Ishmael, (saying): Purify My house for those who go around and those who meditate therein and those who bow down and prostrate themselves (in worship). (Sura 2:125)

And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising the foundations of the House, (Abraham prayed): Our Lord! Accept from us (this duty). Lo! Thou, only Thou, art the Hearer, the Knower. (Sura 2:127)

Of course, as the English scholar Guillaume pointed out:

... there is no historical evidence for the assertion that Abraham or Ishmael was ever in Mecca, and if there had been such a tradition it would have to be explained how all memory of the Old Semitic name Ishmael ... came to be lost. The form in the Quran is taken either from Greek or Syriac sources.

The point Guillaume was making is that the form of the name "Ishmael" found in the Quran is borrowed from Greek and Syriac (from the Biblical traditions). It is implausible that a tradition of the Kaaba being built by Abraham and Ishmael could have been passed down and preserved only in Greek and Syriac (i.e. Christian) traditions, while the name "Ishmael" was forgotten by the Arabs for centuries.

Hadiths or traditions of Muhammad (not the Quran) refer to the *Akedah* event, but in these traditions it is Ishmael who Abraham sacrificed, not Isaac.

Notably, the Quran refers to Ishmael as a prophet of God like Abraham, and within a litany of what the Bible calls patriarchs and the Quran calls "prophets" the name Ishmael can be found. Jacob himself names Ishmael among his "fathers":

Or were ye present when death came to Jacob, when he said unto his sons: What will ye worship after me? They said: We shall worship thy God, the God of thy fathers, Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac, One God, and unto Him we have surrendered. (Sura 2:133)

However, in other places there is reference to "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" without naming Ishmael.

The religion of Abraham was Islam

What is particularly interesting in the Quran – and a key point for this presentation – is that it is in the Quran that the expression "the religion of Abraham" is to be found. This is repeated several times.

What is the meaning of this Quranic phrase, the "religion of Abraham"? The meaning is made clear when the Quran commends the "religion of Abraham" to Jews and Christians, rebuking them for having rejecting it:

Say: Allah speaketh truth. So follow the religion of Abraham, the upright. He was not of the idolaters. (Sura 3:95)

Say: O People of the Scripture! Why disbelieve ye in the revelations of Allah, when Allah (Himself) is Witness of what ye do? (Sura 3:98)

Say: O People of the Scripture! Why drive ye back believers from the way of Allah, seeking to make it crooked, when ye are witnesses (to Allah's guidance)? Allah is not unaware of what ye do. (Sura 3:99)

Muslims also are commanded to follow the "religion of Abraham" as the religion of Muhammad:

And afterward We inspired thee (Muhammad, saying): Follow the religion of Abraham, as one by nature upright. He was not of the idolaters. (Sura 16:123)

Thus, according to the Quran, it is Islam, in contrast to Christianity and Judaism, which is the religion of Abraham. It is the followers of Muhammad who have the "best claim" to Abraham:

Lo! those of mankind who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who believe (with him); and Allah is the Protecting Guardian of the believers. (Sura 3:68; see also 4:125)

Abraham was neither a Christian nor a Jew

Christians and Jews are rebuked for commending their faith to the Arabs. Muslims, the Quran asserts, follow the religion of Abraham, not the religion of idolaters:

And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then ye will be rightly guided. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Nay, but (we follow) the religion of Abraham, the upright, and he was not of the idolaters. (Sura 2:135)

Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. (Sura 2:136)

The Quran claims that Abraham was "neither a Christian nor a Jew":

O People of the Scripture! Why will ye argue about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have ye then no sense? (Sura 3:65)

Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man (*hanif*) who had surrendered (to Allah), and he was not of the idolaters. (Sura 3:67)

Or say ye that Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes were Jews or Christians? Say: Do ye know best, or doth Allah? And who is more unjust than he who hideth a testimony which he hath received from Allah? Allah is not unaware of what ye do. (Sura 2:140)

Muslims must accept Abraham

Indeed it is an article of faith that Muslims are commanded to “make no distinction” between the messengers – i.e. they should accept Abraham just as they accept Muhammad.

Following Muhammad is following Abraham (Sura 2:285, 4:152). Another way of putting this is that if you accept Abraham as a prophet of Allah, you should also “make no distinction” and accept Muhammad:

Lo! We inspire thee [Muhammad] as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him, as We inspired Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and as We imparted unto David the Psalms; (Sura 4:163)

The prototypical Muslim

From the Quran’s perspective, Abraham was the prototypical Muslim. He is used by Muhammad in the Quran as a stick to beat over the heads of Christians and Jews. This arises for example in the context of Muhammad’s disputes with the Jews of Medina (specifically in this Sura: 4:44-57, 156-162). Muhammad is in effect saying, “You quote the name Abraham to me, but Abraham was a Muslim, one of a long line of prophets. If you accept Abraham, you must accept me.”

Islam is the true Judaism and the true Christianity

Not only Abraham, but Moses and Jesus were Muslim prophets according to the Quran. So Islam is the true heritage of Jews and Christians. Jews and Christians who convert to Islam are actually reverting to the faith of the patriarchs, returning to the one true religion.

An Abrahamic political vision for America

According to this view, the “religion of Abraham” is a kind of code for Islam’s precedence over all other religions. Islamic *da’wa* or mission to Christians and Jews involves calling

them to the “religion of Abraham,” *i.e.* to Islam. Shamin A. Siddiqi of Flushing, New York put this position in a letter to Daniel Pipes:

Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad were all prophets of Islam. Islam is the common heritage of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim community of America, and establishing the Kingdom of God is the joint responsibility of all three Abrahamic faiths. Islam was the *din* (faith, way of life) of both Jews and Christians, who later lost it through human innovations. Now the Muslims want to remind their Jews and Christian brothers and sisters of their original *din*. These are the facts of history.

This vision, clothed in harmonious-sounding language, in fact is of a sharia-compliant United States led by Muslims and created with the help of Jews and Christians. It is “Abrahamic” in the sense that it is Islamic, as Islam is the common heritage of the three faiths. And within this vision of sharia America, non-Muslims should be relegated to the subservient role of promoters of Islam.

Today the phrase “Abrahamic religion” has become a touchstone of interfaith dialogue and unity between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. But ironically this phrase is another rendering of the “religion of Abraham” of the Quran: the phrase refers to Abraham as a Muslim.

Abraham a Figure of Division Between the Three Faiths

In reality Abraham is an intensely divisive figure between Jews, Christians and Muslims. For many Christians he is the apostle of salvation by faith alone, in opposition to Torah-observance. For Jews he is the Torah-observant father of the Jewish nation, and a reminder of God’s irrevocable covenant with the Jews. For Muslims he is the prototypical Muslim prophet, a prominent forerunner and validator of Muhammad’s claim and the ground of Muslim claims that Islam both predates and supersedes the Biblical faiths.

The Origins of the Expression “Abrahamic Religion”

I have been tracing the origins of the concept of “Abrahamic faith” in reference to monotheistic dialogue. Its most important and influential promoter was a Lebanese Maronite priest, Youakim Moubarac, following in the footsteps of his teacher, Massignon, who regarded Islam as a faith of genuine revelation – and Muhammad as a prophet – but in more primitive stage than Christianity.

Moubarac devoted his 1951 doctoral dissertation *Abraham dans le Coran* to the topic of Abraham in Islam. He was subsequently a significant influence on Vatican II’s policy on Islam, which

has shaped the current Catholic catechism, which sees Islam and Christianity as united by adoration of the one God:

841 The Church's relationship with the Muslims. "The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Muslims; these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day." [330]

An Abrahamic utopia and dhimmi theology

Moubarac saw in the theme of Abrahamic faith a force which could unite Christians, Jews and Arabs into one family. Thus he wrote that one should "promote an egalitarian Palestine in which Jews, Christians and Muslims demonstrate together its abrahamic and ecumenical vocation."

This vision of a political and spiritual reconciliation between faiths based upon a shared identity as followers of "Abrahamic faith" is fundamentally flawed. In fact it leads to Islamization, as a society based on the Quranic concept of Abrahamic faith is a sharia state, which by virtue of the structure of Islamic law, is devoted to the decline and ultimate disappearance of Christianity and Judaism.

It should not be surprising that a Christian from a *dhimmi* background, from a nation traumatized by the massacres of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, would produce an quintessential *dhimmi* theology, one which offers to Christians the option of serving Islam by embracing the legitimacy of Islam and thus of Muslim power. Bat Ye'or writes:

Moubarac interpreted the end of Christian political power [*i.e.* in Lebanon] as a religious liberation which would restore to the Church the vocation that Islam had assigned to it: a service of charity and love toward Muslims. (*Islam and Dhimmitude* p. 183.)

The promotion of "Abrahamic faith" as the touchstone of interfaith religious dialogue was linked in its origins with a vision of a Middle Eastern utopia in which Christians, Muslims and Jews would live side by side in unity. In reality this vision encouraged Islamophile church leaders in Lebanon to fight alongside Palestinians to destroy the political and national structures of Christianity in Lebanon. The ultimate outcome has been, and will continue to be, the progressive Islamization of that nation and destruction of the church – in accordance with the internal goals of Islamic doctrine, a process which is now reaching end-game stage in Iraq and perhaps also Syria.

Rowan Williams on Sharia law in Europe

I am minded to recall the previous Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams's suggestion that the British embrace aspects of Sharia law, claiming that "It is not as if we're bringing in an alien and rival system." Undoubtedly Williams' views were based upon his experiences of interfaith dialogue, which had schooled him in the underlying unity of the Abrahamic faiths. Thus he became an apologist for sharia law and its alien and abhorrent treatment of women: the pointy end of Williams's proposal is of course the entrenchment of sharia courts in the UK, which are not good for the rights of Muslim women. By making this statement he became, albeit unwittingly, an apologist for the sharia itself, including by implication its demand that Muslims be politically dominant.

Conclusion

The concept of "Abrahamic faiths" is a fallacy. Its contemporary influence was, tragically, born out of a century of Christian suffering in the Middle East and foisted upon the unsuspecting West. It is reasonable to ask whether this is a theological Trojan horse designed to promote an Islamic worldview of relations between faiths.

By all means, let us discuss Abraham and what he stands for in different faiths, and note that the narratives of the three monotheistic faiths refer to Abraham. But it is unwise to take Abraham as a touchstone of unity and theological continuity. On the contrary, the name of Abraham stands for the profound divisions between the three monotheistic faiths.

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