

**The Pre-existence of Christ**  
Christ's presence revealed through the Old Testament

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THESIS

Christ pre-existence is clearly shown through the Old Testament and taught by the New Testament writers. This paper will show how Christ was portrayed through the Old Testament and how the early church founders understood the doctrine of Christ pre-existence as a universal Christian Christological belief.

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of Christ pre-existence is foundational to the Christian faith. Its teaching is also the basis on which other Christian doctrines depend. Without the pre-existence Christ's incarnation, resurrection, and atoning work are in question. Since Christ's pre-existence has been taught since the beginning of the early church and reaffirmed by the New Testament authors, the acceptance or rejection of this doctrine affects the whole of Christology and our overall understanding of Christianity. The traditional teaching is that Christ preexisted before he became human as Jesus of Nazareth. God the Son, and the second person of the Trinity, is part of the Godhead, preexisting before the incarnation. This doctrine of Christ's pre-existence explains why

the incarnation is an expression of God's love for fallen humanity.<sup>1</sup> The Jesus Christ existed before he entered into this world through the incarnation. Our understanding and acceptance of the pre-existence is important as it affects our understanding of God, the Trinity, Christology, creation, and salvation. Without the Son's pre-existence there can be no incarnation, which is the precursor to the Christian doctrine of salvation and God's covenant laid out in the Old Testament scriptures. This is why the pre-existence is so significant.

#### THE NEW TESTAMENT AUTHORS UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRE-EXISTENCE

The New Testament writers, Paul, John, and the Hebrews author affirmed Christ pre-existence not in the context of proving the doctrine, but instead mentioned it for the purpose of making another point. The writers understood and accepted its teaching as a cord belief.<sup>2</sup>

In the Gospel of John, the Jewish leaders questioned Jesus on who he was. During their interrogation, Jesus answers them, "*prin abraam genesthai ego eimi.*" Literally, "Before Abraham was existing, I am." "*Ego eimi*" is plainly, "I am. Jesus clearly identified his position of his pre-existence in John 8:58. According to scholars this is the clearest instance of Jesus claim of divinity and is the equivalent language God spoke to Moses in Exodus 3:14, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" The Jewish leaders would have understood very well that Jesus was

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<sup>1</sup> McCready, Douglas, *He Came Down From Heaven: The Pre-existence of Christ Revisited*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 40/3, Sept 1997, p 419-432

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p 419-432

claiming his pre-existence and his Godhead.<sup>3</sup> Their actions reflected their understanding his claim as we read in the next verses, “they picked up stones to throw at Him.” They viewed Jesus’ claim as blasphemy, a claim demanding death by stoning.<sup>4</sup>

John also begins his Gospel stating Christ pre-existence; “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” And later continues his doxology in stating; “the Word became flesh,”<sup>5</sup> John attributing the “Word” to Jesus of Nazareth. The scriptures also affirm the creation of the universe was by the Son as stated by the Hebrews author, “He made the world,” (1:2) and in John 1:3, “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.” and in Paul wrote about the pre-existence in this letter to the Colossian church in verse 1:16 “For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him.”<sup>6</sup> The author’s doxologies plainly assert Christ pre-existence in His creation of the world.

Paul’s letter to the Rome church is unique among his writings in that he is addressing a church he has not founded or visited. Paul assumes that Christ’s pre-existence is something his audience has long since come to accept. He wrote to the church on matters of knowledge he believes is common to all believers. Paul declared to the Roman church that God sent His *own Son* as an offering for our sins.<sup>7</sup> God’s love for his creation can be seen in his involvement in the death of Christ. This divine act was

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<sup>3</sup> Freed, Edwin D., *Who or What was Before Abraham: John 8:58*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, no 17 F 1983, p 52

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 24:16

<sup>5</sup> John 1:1-2; 14, NASB

<sup>6</sup> Bruce, F.F., *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans Publishing, 1990, pg 45-47

<sup>7</sup> Romans 5:15-17; 8:3 NASB

part of the early Christian Christological teachings of the pre-existence. Paul outlines Christ's life culminating with his death on the cross and resurrection. Grace, righteousness, and justification are phrases specialty attributed to God himself, but in Paul's writings he uses these attributes interchangeably with God and Jesus validating Paul's pre-existence Christology.<sup>8</sup> If Christ is not affirmed as the God's pre-existent son, then the central texts of Paul's letter is in jeopardy.

The Hebrews Christ is both the creator of the world and the sustainer of all things. The author argues the superiority of the Son over the angels, and addresses him as Lord and God.<sup>9</sup> The author uses verses in the Psalms that describe God authority over heaven and earth and connects these verses to Jesus authority.<sup>10</sup> In his writings the author establishes the understanding of the very nature of Jesus and his pre-existence as part of the Godhead.<sup>11</sup>

Christ pre-existence is also implied through the Hebrew references of a type of Christ in the Melchizedek priesthood. The priestly order was greater than the priesthood of Abraham and all other priesthoods since. The Melchizedek was without a father or a mother, had no genealogy, and always existed, having no beginning or ending. The role of the Melchizedek remained forever.<sup>12</sup> Only briefly mentioned in Genesis 14, and Psalms 110:4, the author denotes the description of the priesthood to the eternal nature of the Son of God; proclaiming Jesus as the eternal Melchizedek and King of Righteousness

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<sup>8</sup> Byrne, Brendan, *Christ's Pre-Existence in Pauline Soteriology*, Journal of Theological Studies, 50 no 1997, p 308-330

<sup>9</sup> Psalms 1:8; Mealand, David L., *The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Modern Churchman, ns 22 no 4 1979, p 183

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 1:5-13

<sup>11</sup> Mealand, p 180-185

<sup>12</sup> Bruce, pg 156-160

and Peace.<sup>13</sup> Having now proclaimed the superior nature of Jesus' preexisted priesthood, Christ is able to intercede for us as our greater High Priest.

#### OPPOSITION TO THE DOCTRINE OF THE PRE-EXISTENCE OF CHRIST

Opposition to the doctrine of Christ's pre-existence began during the time of Enlightenment during the early 1700's.<sup>14</sup> During this time, all previous truths were questioned in order to develop a new "enlightened" truth. If something could not be explained scientifically then it was rejected and disbelieved as truth. Under this methodology, much of Christ's pre-existence claims were replaced with a new understanding and interpretation. Christ pre-existence was argued as a mythological idea, and the text that supported the pre-existence was interpreted to mean Jesus' pre-existence was in the *mind* and *purpose* of God, and not real.<sup>15</sup> Other explanations recommended belief in inspiration instead of the incarnation. The pre-existence was therefore rejected and Jesus was presented as a God-filled man, and not the God-man. Once you detach Jesus from the incarnation, the pre-existence can be discredited. This further erosion of Christ pre-existence resulted in His divinity being relegated to a myth that was invented to give him a status equal to the heroic figures of his time.<sup>16</sup>

One of the strongest opponents of the pre-existence was John Knox. Knox argued the doctrine of pre-existence made Christ less human. He argued that we can either have the humanity of Christ or the pre-existence, but there is no way of having both.<sup>17</sup> In order

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<sup>13</sup> Hebrews 7:2

<sup>14</sup> McCready, Douglas, *He Came Down From Heaven: The Pre-existence of Christ Revisited*, Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, 40/3, Sept 1997, p 419-432

<sup>15</sup> Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ and Modern Theology*, Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990, p 55-69

<sup>16</sup> Gaiser, Frederick, J., *The Old Testament and the Christian Gospel*, Word & World, 7 no 4 Fall 1987, p 406-411

<sup>17</sup> Knox, John, *The Humanity and Divinity of Christ, A study of Patten in Christology*, Cambridge Publishing: Cambridge, 1967 p. 10-11

to preserve Jesus' full humanity, Knox removed everything else that is significant to him. Knox is working from the presupposition that Christ could not be both divine and human. He believes the idea of the pre-existence was formed after Christ's resurrection in order to explain Christ unique relationship with God.<sup>18</sup> Knox's logic breaks down as he ignores the theological doctrine of the Trinity, which Knox supports. If there is no pre-existence, then there is no Trinity.

### JESUS' CLAIMS OF HIS PRE-EXISTENCE

If we are to understand the pre-existence we need to also examine how Christ viewed his own self-consciousness.

Jesus claimed to forgive sin, an act that only God could do. In the account of the paralytic man been lowered through the roof by his friends to be seen by Jesus, He did not respond to this mans need for physical healing, but instead told the man, "Son, your *sins* are forgiven."<sup>19</sup> The scribes listening to Jesus understood the claim he was making that he was able to *forgive* sins and they viewed his claim to be blasphemy, as they commented; "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?"<sup>20</sup>

Jesus also spoke of judging the world and having the authority to judge the spiritual condition of all people.<sup>21</sup> A power only God could exercise. His authority is also seen when he was questioned about picking heads of grain on the Sabbath, an action that was in violation of the Sabbath law. Jesus responded by noting that David had also violated this law He then redefined the Sabbath in Mark 2:27-28; 'Jesus said to them,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 10-11

<sup>19</sup> Mark 2:3-5

<sup>20</sup> Mark 2:7

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 25:31-46

“The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath;” again a claim that he was Lord and God.

When confronted by the high priest to tell them if he was the Christ, the Son of God, Jesus answers them "You have said it yourself; nevertheless I tell you, hereafter you will see THE SON OF MAN SITTING AT THE RIGHT HAND OF POWER, and COMING ON THE CLOUDS OF HEAVEN." (Matthew 26:63) Jesus did not dispute the charge that he claimed to be God, and he accepted his disciple's acknowledgment of his deity.<sup>22</sup>

In regards to the Old Testament scriptures, Jesus instructed the Jews; “You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life.”<sup>23</sup> Jesus told his disciples pointedly; “all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.”<sup>24</sup> Jesus saw His life and work as a fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and prophecies.<sup>25</sup>

Up to this point in Jewish history, the sins of the people could only be covered by the sacrifice of animals as directed in the Hebrew law. Each year the High Priest would perform sacrifices as prescribed by God for the *covering* of Israel's sins. A blood sacrifice did not remove the sin of the people, but was only a *covering* that needed to be performed continuously. God made a covenant with his people that he would send a sacrifice that would *remove* the sins of the people. God foretold this New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and the Hebrews author reaffirmed in Hebrews 8;

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<sup>22</sup> Ellis, Earle, *How Jesus Interpreted His Bible*, Criswell Theological Review v 32, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1989, p 341-351

<sup>23</sup> John 5:39-40

<sup>24</sup> Luke 24:44

<sup>25</sup> Ellis, p 341-351

"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. "They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." (NASB)

The Old Covenant was to be replaced with this New Covenant. It wasn't until John the Baptist announces the Messiah in John 1:29 that we see this prophesy proclaimed. "The next day he (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who *takes away* the sin of the world!" (emphasis added, NASB) This declaration that Jesus would take away sins was contrary to a system that was understood and practiced for thousands of year. John the Baptist understood and recognized Jesus pre-existence as only God-Jesus could forgive sins.

#### THE "SHADOWY" PICTURE OF JESUS IN THE TABERNACLE

Since Jesus is our high priest, he can now perform the duties of the priesthood on our behalf. The ceremony of the Old Covenant was centered around the Old Testament Tabernacle as this signified the Lord's presence and was where God dwelled on earth. (See Appendix I) God's instructions for the tabernacle were very specific and exact as this was a divine picture of God's provision, and a shadow of Christ's role as our High Priest.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Friel, Todd, *Beyond the Shadow of a Doubt*, Talk the Walk Series, Living Waters, 2008



The outer courtyard could only be entered through one door; within the courtyard the laver was placed for the priest to wash daily. They could not enter the Holy Place without washing. In the Holy Place only the priest could enter and would do so daily to perform his duties. Within the Holy Place, the Golden Lamp stand burned day and night serving as the only light in the tabernacle. Across from the lamp stand was the Showbread and table. On this table laid twelve loaves of bread representing God's covenant with Israel. Also in this room was the Altar of Incense that burned continuously and represented prayers of the people. The final room was the Holy of Holies. In this room only the High Priest could enter on the Day of Atonement and was separated from the Holy Place by a veil. In the Holy of Holies rested the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat. It was here that God was present. The Temple was the center of the Mosaic covenant and was just a shadow of the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> John 1:14 tells us that the Word (Jesus) became flesh and *dwelt* among us. This word for *dwelt* is similar to the word in Hebrew for tabernacle; John is stating that Jesus is our tabernacle. Hebrews affirms Christ roll as our High Priest in Chapter 8,9,and 10; "He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation."<sup>28</sup> The New covenant centers on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and His shedding of His blood for the forgiveness of sins. To enter the Temple, Jesus declared He is the door; "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he shall be saved."<sup>29</sup> Christ is the Laver; Jesus answered, "If I do not wash you, you have no part of

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<sup>27</sup> MacLeod, David J., *The Cleansing of the True Tabernacle*, Bibliotheca sacra, 152 no 605 Jan-Mar 1995, p 60-71

<sup>28</sup> Hebrews 9:11

<sup>29</sup> John 10:9

Me.”<sup>30</sup> Christ is our Lamp Stand; Jesus spoke to them saying, “I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.”<sup>31</sup> Christ is the Showbread; Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger.”<sup>32</sup> Christ is the Altar of Incense; “Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”<sup>33</sup> Christ is the Veil; “Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh.”<sup>34</sup> Christ is the Mercy Seat; “being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood”<sup>35</sup> Christ is our High Priest; “For it was fitting for us to have such a High Priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens.”<sup>36</sup> Christ is our Sacrifice; “By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”<sup>37</sup>

The Hebrews text portrays Christ as the preexistent eternal, heavenly being with God. By speaking to the fulfillment of Jesus and the sacrificial system of the priesthood, the author is making clear Christ superiority to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.<sup>38</sup> The primary assurance of Hebrews is that the true deliverance from God only comes from the one that is able to bridge the gap between God and man; Jesus Christ.

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<sup>30</sup> John 13:8

<sup>31</sup> John 8:12

<sup>32</sup> John 6:35

<sup>33</sup> Hebrews 7:25

<sup>34</sup> Hebrews 10:19-20

<sup>35</sup> Romans 3:24-25

<sup>36</sup> Hebrews 7:26

<sup>37</sup> Hebrews 10:10

<sup>38</sup> Mealand, David L., *The Christology of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Modern Churchman, ns 22 no 4 1979, p 185

## JESUS' PRE-EXISTENCE EXPLAINED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The New Testament writers declared the deity of Christ in their understanding of the term “Lord” found in the Old Testament. Several of the authors referenced Jesus as “Lord” attaching to Jesus one of the Hebrew names for God.<sup>39</sup> These references make it clear the authors understood Jesus to be “Lord” and equal with the Father. Paul encouraged Timothy to use what he understood of the Old Testament, which is able to “give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus,”<sup>40</sup> to prove to the Jews that Christ was the fulfillment of the covenant. Peter also used the Old Testament prophets Joel as well as the Hebrews writer referenced Psalms to prove Jesus was the Christ. Also, the Book of Acts records Philip meeting with the Ethiopian eunuch who was puzzled about the meaning of scripture found in Isaiah 53:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

Philip told him about Jesus and how he was the fulfillment of that Old Testament verse.<sup>41</sup>

Because the New Testament ushered in a new history for Israel, the Old Testament prophecies could be viewed new under a New Testament meaning. The Old Testament prophecies reflected the author's own time and meaning, but when understood through

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<sup>39</sup> Hebrews 1:8; Acts 2:20-21; Romans 10:13; 1Peter 3:15; Greidanus, Sidney, *The Necessity of Preaching Christ From the Old Testament Text*, Calvin Theological Journal, vo 34, 1999, p 188-197

<sup>40</sup> 2Timothy 3:14-15

<sup>41</sup> Acts 8:35

the New Testament revelations, a new meaning could be understood without eroding the original teachings.<sup>42</sup>

An example of this is found in Hosea 1:1 and quoted in Matthew 2:15. In this passage Hosea is quoting God and stated, "Out of Egypt I called my Son," showing that through Israel's exodus from Egypt, God's Son, the Messiah, would come. Matthew parallels this prophecy in his Gospel revealing how God calling Joseph, Mary and the young Jesus to return home from hiding in Egypt.<sup>43</sup>

The original meaning of the text is understood, but when processed through the filter of the New Testament, a new understanding can be learned. The prophecies that foretold of the Messiah's coming were a testament to Jesus pre-existence. Jesus stated that he was here to fulfill the evidence that was told about him. In Luke 24:44 he stated; "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." This statement clearly demonstrates Jesus understanding of His pre-existence. As he affirms the Old Testament text was a foretelling of his pre-existence to the fulfillment of God's covenant. Since the Old Testament is a witness of Jesus Christ, we are able to see the pre-existence of Christ revealed throughout the scriptures.<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The pinnacle of Jesus Christ pre-existence is his claim to be God. Most of the world religions view Jesus as a good teacher or a wise prophet. If his claim to be God is

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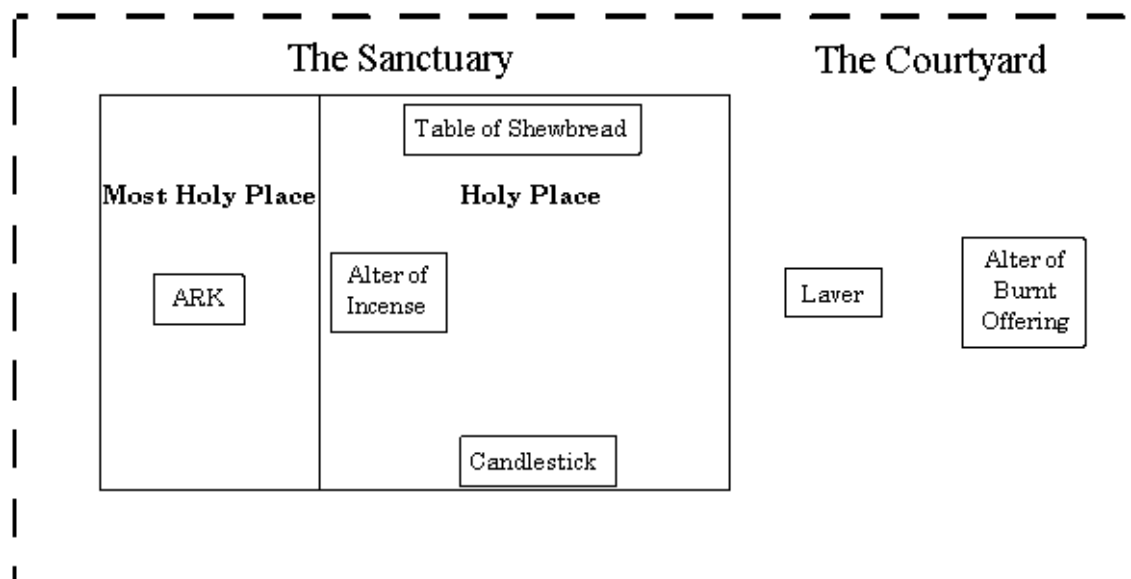
<sup>42</sup> Kaiser, Walter C., Jr. *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, Zondervan Publishing: Grand Rapids, 1995, pg. 12

<sup>43</sup> Linss, Wilhelm C., Prediction and Fulfillment, *The Lutheran Quarterly*, 11 no 3 August 1959, p 241

<sup>44</sup> Kaiser, p 14

valid, then all the other stated religions are false. Christ's pre-existence affirms what Christianity is and is not; if Jesus is the incarnation of the preexistent Son of God, Christianity would stand alone as the only true religion founded by God. This explains why the pre-existence has become so disputed and why we must have a solid understanding of our Christology doctrine. Once we let the world transform our beliefs, we become unable to defend the pre-existence, and deny God's ability to enter into His creation. Without the pre-existence we limit God's divinity. Once we loosen the thread on the doctrinal "sweater" we start to unravel the foundational principles attached. Without the pre-existence we jeopardize the deity of Christ, His claims to be God, the doctrine of the Trinity, the resurrection, the full fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies and the very core of our salvation. The pre-existence prevents us from transforming Christianity into another world religion. The creator of the world became one of us to demonstrate his love, taking on all humanities sins as only the God-man Jesus could do. The pre-existence is the demonstration of Jesus' full deity and full humanity. Many of today's Christians have lost the ability to argue the case for the historical evidence of the Messiah and show that all scripture points to our savior Jesus Christ. If we are to continue to remain strong in our faith, we must have a solid foundation in our understanding of Christ and His pre-existence.

## Appendix I



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