

AND THEY WERE SORE AFRAID

An Analysis of Angelophanic Fear in the Old and New Testaments

by

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In his article *The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 2: Samson*,¹ Michael J. Smith highlights Manoah's reaction to the appearance of the angel against the broader background of male characters in Judges, asserting that his behaviour is indicative of his spiritual weakness in comparison with his wife. This paper will summarize Smith's argument before proceeding to demonstrate that all instances of manifest fear at angelophanies across both testaments can be read as authorial commentary on the spiritual fitness of those who witness the visions. This will be shown through an examination of the stories of Gideon, Daniel and his travelling companions, the two Marys at the tomb of Christ, Zacharias, the shepherds in Luke, and Cornelius. Afterward, two special cases will be considered: Balaam and his ass, as well as David and Jesus.

Smith sees the weakness of men in comparison with female characters as a recurring theme of the Book of Judges, beginning with Barak's unwillingness to proceed to war without Deborah's aid. Gideon continues the pattern, requiring frequent probings and testings. In the story of Manoah, Smith finds a double comparison; Manoah's spiritual weakness is not only set off against the faith of his wife, but against the physical strength of his son.² Harvey Hartman has observed that, although Manoah's wife is never named, the appearance of the angel to her in her husband's absence places her firmly in the role of protagonist.³ It is directly to her that the pending birth of the child is announced, and the instructions given that he is to be a Nazarite, and that she is to refrain from all which is forbidden to the Nazarites during the pregnancy. Notably, she describes the angel only as a "man of God [...] having the countenance of an angel, very

1 Michael J. Smith, "The Failure of the Family in Judges, Part 2: Samson" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 no 648 (October-December 2005): 424-36.

2 *Ibid.*, 426.

3 Harvey D. Hartman, *The Feminine Gender as a Literary Device in the Narrative of Judges*, (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1992), 163.

awful."⁴ After she has related the encounter to Manoah, he prays that the man may return to provide them with further instruction. The Lord answers Manoah's prayer, but the angel returns to visit his wife in the field, once again without her husband present. Manoah's wife fetches him, and he proceeds to interrogate the man with regards to the upbringing of the expected child. Whereas his wife seems to have had premonitions from the first that the man of God is, in fact, an angelic being, Manoah is completely oblivious to this.⁵ The angel seems annoyed with his interlocution, and merely restates the instructions already given to his wife; the only special injunction Manoah receives is to aid her in keeping the commands. Manoah then, following the customs of Middle Eastern hospitality, offers to dress a kid for his guest, but the angel refuses his offering, and bids him make it a sacrifice to God. Manoah prepares the offering, and the angel disappears, ascending in the flame. It is only then that Manoah realizes the nature of his guest. Both man and wife fall to the ground in obeisance. Manoah is afraid, but his wife remains unperturbed. "And he said to his wife: We shall certainly die, because we have seen God. And his wife answered him: If the Lord had a mind to kill us, he would not have received a holocaust and libations at our hands, neither would he have shewed us all these things, nor have told us the things that are to come."⁶ Smith rightly points out that Manoah's wife's more thoughtful reaction to the situation indicates her greater understanding of the ways of God.⁷ Manoah's fear is clearly born of his lack of faith and comparative ignorance of the God and His methods.

I find Smith's analysis of Manoah's story to be compelling, and believe that it can be expanded well beyond the confines of that narrative. Because fear is not a universal reaction in

4 Judges 13:6 All biblical quotations follow the Douay-Rheims translation.

5 Judges 13:16

6 Judges 13:22-3

7 Smith, *The Failure of the Family in Judges*, 428.

the biblical stories (besides Manoah's wife, many others who find favour in God's eyes are unperturbed by angelophanies)⁸ those instances in which the biblical writers use what I will call 'the symbology of fear' stand out distinctively. Far from being a prevailing belief of Jewish society, the concerns expressed by characters such as Manoah that an angelic vision will cause their demise are uncommon in the texts, and therefore deserve to be examined closely. While not all people with weakened relationships to God experience fear, as indicated by the apparent unconcern of the Israelites when collectively addressed by angels in the desert,⁹ every instance of fear is specifically deployed to reflect some manner of spiritual weakness on the part of the character.

Although he does not address it, Smith alludes to the story of Gideon, where we see a similar paradigm play out. The angel appears to Gideon by the side of the road and engages him in conversation. Gideon is unaware of the angelic nature of the stranger, and proceeds to complain of God's abandonment of Israel, whereupon the angel prophecies of his calling. Like Manoah, Gideon insists on making an offering, and fetches a kid and some bread. The angel, by means of a wand, consumes them with fire, and disappears himself. It is only then that Gideon realizes the nature of his encounter, and begins to fear. "And Gedeon seeing that it was the angel of the Lord, said: Alas, my Lord God: for I have seen the angel of the Lord face to face. And the Lord said to him: Peace be with thee: fear not, thou shalt not die."¹⁰ Gideon's fear of the angel is subsequently reflected in his fear in executing the mission with which the angel leaves him—the

8 e.g. Hagar (Genesis 7:13, 21:17), Lot (Genesis 19:1-15), Abraham (Genesis 22:11-15), Jacob (Genesis 28:12-7, 31:11-12, 32:1-2), Elijah (whose nap is barely disturbed; 3 Kings [1 Kings] 19:5-8, 4 Kings [2 Kings] 1:3-4, 15), Zechariah (Zechariah 1:9-19, 2:3, 4:1-11, 5:5-10, 6:4-5), Ezra (2 Esdras), Joseph (Matthew 1:20-24, 2:13), Mary (Luke 1:26-30), Philip (Acts 8:26-7), Peter (Acts 12:7-11), and Paul (Acts 27:23-5)

9 Exodus 14:19, Judges 2:1-5

10 Judges 6:22-3

destruction of the grove of Baal. "Then Gideon taking ten men of his servants, did as the Lord had commanded him. But fearing his father's house, and the men of that city, he would not do it by day, but did all by night."¹¹ The weakness of Gideon's faith shows itself also in his insistence upon trying God by signs. He places wool upon the floor, and asks that he find it dry in the morning as a proof of God's commitment to support his mission. When his prayer is answered, he asks for the sign to be repeated, with all the ground wet around. Even as he asks, he recognizes the impropriety of his request, and fears retribution for his doubts, beseeching God that He not be wrathful with him.¹² God uses fear as the first means of sifting Gideon's army away from him, and then acknowledges Gideon's timorousness by allowing him to take his servant Phara with him to the enemy camp, which he does. Gideon's story is brought to its climax when fear is used to rout the opposing army which vastly outnumbers his forces. From Gideon's trepidation in his first assignment to the ignominious rout of the Midian army, fear is used consistently to denote weakness of faith, and this fear is prefigured first in Gideon's reaction to the angel.¹³

More often than not, the fear experienced by the weak in faith is contrasted with the tranquility of the righteous figure. This was seen in the story of Manoah and his wife, and is repeated in the description of Daniel and his travelling companions. Daniel's righteousness is first emphasized by the relation of the conditions of his lamentation and fasting. "In those days I

11 Judges 6:27

12 Judges 6:39

13 Wolfgang. Bluedorn (in "Yahweh Versus Baalism. A Theological Reading of the Gideon-Abimelech Narrative" in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement*, series 329, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 113-124.) has suggested a movement beyond the traditional reading of Gideon as merely weak and vacillating, seeing him instead as an outright rival to YHWH who wishes to claim the glory of Israel's salvation for himself. This would provide a further explanation of why the biblical authors chose to depict him within the context of the symbology of fear. Another possibility is opened up in the argument advanced by Isabelle de Castelbajac (in "Le cycle de Gédéon ou la condamnation du refus de la royauté" in *Vetus Testamentum* 57 (2007): 161.) that Gideon's characterization betrays some archaic elements which portray him as a Canaanite chieftain with attachments to cults other than Yahweh's.

Daniel mourned the days of three weeks. I ate no desirable bread, and neither flesh, nor wine entered into my mouth, neither was I anointed with ointment: till the days of three weeks were accomplished."¹⁴ Thus marked in his holiness, the way is cleared for Daniel to experience his angelophany, which occurs by the Tigris. Daniel's companions go unmentioned until after the description of the angel; their presence is almost an afterthought. "And I Daniel alone saw the vision: for the men that were with me saw it not: but an exceeding great terror fell upon them, and they fled away, and hid themselves."¹⁵ Although Daniel proceeds to lose his strength, faint, and tremble, he does not flee, neither does he ever vocalize fear. The greater trauma of his reaction in comparison with that of the characters in Judges is explicable by the greater majesty of the apparition, which makes a stunning supernatural entrance, rather than appearing in the form of a man.¹⁶ Daniel's physical reaction is meant not to communicate to the reader in a vacuum, but rather to be interpreted by contrast with his companions. These, interestingly, remain unnamed. It is tempting to read this in the same spirit as Smith reads the anonymity of Manoah's wife, who, he contends, remains unnamed because she is a stand-in for the women of Israel more generally.¹⁷ Daniel's companions may, likewise, represent the spiritual condition of Israel generally. Overcome with fear, they hide their faces from the angel of the Lord while the prophet, though he trembles, will not flee.

The same motif is sometimes used to describe specific, rather than habitual, lapses of

14 Daniel 10:2-3

15 Daniel 10:7

16 Christopher Rowland (in "A Man Clothed in Linen" in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 24 (1985): 100.) has pointed out that Daniel's vision contains some of the classic elements of theophany, over and above angelophany. This conflation of the two different kind of narratives may also help to account for Daniel's somewhat ambiguous reaction.

17 Smith, 429.

faith. Such is the case of Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary"¹⁸ when they come to the tomb of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. The angel is already present when they arrive, having demonstrated the intensity of the fear which overtakes non-believers in the presence of the angelic host: "For an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and coming, rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. And his countenance was as lightning, and his raiment as snow. And for fear of him, the guards were struck with terror, and became as dead men."¹⁹ Although it is not said at this point that the Marys were afraid at beholding him, we may infer this from the fact that the angel is said to reply although they have not spoken, which may be taken as a reply directed toward their expressions or body language. "And the angel answering, said to the women: Fear not you; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he is risen, as he said."²⁰ What is key in this passage is the angel's reminder that Jesus had prophesied his own resurrection. The faith of the Marys has wavered insofar as they expected to find him in the tomb against his own predictions. Consequently, they experience fear in the presence of the angel. The difference made by their usual righteousness and devotion may be told from the comparison of their outcome with that of the guards; while the guards become as dead men, the women "went out quickly from the sepulchre with fear and great joy".²¹ Although angels frequently declare that they bring joyous news, the two Marys are the only visionaries said to experience joy as a result of their vision. Nonetheless, fear does not lose its place of primacy; Mark stresses it particularly, indicating not only "trembling and fear" but also that "they said nothing to any man; for they

18 Matthew 28:1

19 Matthew 28:2-4

20 Matthew 28:5-6

21 Matthew 28:8

were afraid".²² Luke lets them speak to the apostles, but makes a point of their fear nonetheless.²³

Similar to the two Marys is the case of Zacharias the priest. Luke tells us that he and his wife "were both just before God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame."²⁴ How then, are we to explain Zacharias' response to the vision of the angel? For Zacharias, "seeing him, was troubled, and fear fell upon him."²⁵ I propose that the answer to this question lies in the very particular context of Zacharias' vision. Zacharias is a priest, and "according to the custom of the priestly office, it was his lot to offer incense, going into the temple of the Lord."²⁶ It is here, at the temple, that the angel appears to him, "standing on the right side of the alter of incense."²⁷ Yet the child whose birth the angel has come to announce is John the Baptist, who will lead his followers away from the temple cult, and reject the orthodox practices of the Judaism served by Zacharias. The angel characterizes John's career: "For he shall be great before the Lord [...] and shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb. And he shall convert many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. And he shall go

22 Mark 16:8 Zane C. Hodges (in "The Women and the Empty Tomb" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 193 no 492 (October, 1966): 306), especially on the basis of Mark, notes the connection between fear and unbelief on the part of the visitors to the tomb. His view is echoed by Paul Danove ("The Characterization and Narrative Function of the Women at the Tomb (Mark 15, 40-41. 47; 16, 1-8)" in *Biblica* 77 (1996): 391-2.). I believe that the theology of fear described here lends weight to their arguments as against those of scholars such as William Lane ("The Gospel of Mark" in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 591.) and David Catchpole ("The Fearful Silence of the Women at the Tomb: A Study in Markan Theology" in *Journal of Theology for South Africa* 18 (1977): 7-8.), as these scholars, depending on the reading of fear as a reaction of religious awe, fail to provide an explanation for the widely disparate reactions of various biblical characters, which often include no fear at all. Additionally, while some scholars would contest the identification of the 'young man' in Mark as an angel, I have elected to follow the opinion of Susan Miller ("They Said Nothing to Anyone: The Fear and Silence of the Women at the Empty Tomb (Mk 16.1-8)" in *Feminist Theology* 13 no 1 (S 2004): 80.), among others, that the traditional interpretation is justified by the dual use of the term 'ἄγγελος', and more concordant with the other synoptic descriptions.

23 Luke 24:5

24 Luke 1:6

25 Luke 1:12

26 Luke 1:9

27 Luke 1:11

before him in the spirit and power of Elias; that he may turn the hearts of the fathers unto the children, and the incredulous to the wisdom of the just, to prepare unto the Lord a perfect people."²⁸ The suggestion that John will convert the people and bring them back to God is suggestive of the inadequacy and corruption of the temple cult. The previous passage indicates that there is no shortage of devotion on the part of the Jewish people when it relates that "all the multitude of the people was praying without, at the hour of incense."²⁹ Rather, the temple cult is displeasing and unacceptable to God, who means to overthrow it by the work of John, and then of Jesus. Yet Zacharias, otherwise a righteous man, is intimately engaged in the service of this cult. Luke suggests to us the inadequacy of even the most dedicated and fervent devotion to first century Judaism through this use of the well-established fear motif. Even where outside indications would not otherwise lead us to find fault with Zacharias' faith, his fear at the presence of the angel betrays the weakness of a faith which clings, however well-meaningly, to the order which is about to pass away by the work of the Lord.³⁰

What Zacharias' fear communicates about the state of the priestly class in Israel the shepherds in the second chapter communicate about the common folk. They are keeping night watch over their flocks when the angel arrives, attending to the affairs of the world and completely oblivious to the miracle occurring nearby. It was then that "an angel of the Lord stood

28 Luke 1:15-7

29 Luke 1:10

30 One is further tempted to contrast Gabriel's dealings with Zacharias with those which he has with Mary. Both Zacharias and Mary inquire of him how the miraculous birth can be possible against the existing circumstances, and both are given a reply. Zacharias, however, is made mute for three days as a sign of the veracity of the annunciation, while Mary is left free to respond with her now famous *fiat*. Perhaps the author of Luke here means to contrast the inability of Zacharias, as a temple priest, to respond to the new dispensation or to communicate it effectively to men with Mary's ability to adjust herself to the plan which God is unveiling. Zacharias is simply too closely tied to the old world.

by them, and the brightness of God shone round about them; and they feared with a great fear."³¹

There is a tremendous similarity (which may help to argue for the single authorship of Luke-Acts) between the story related about Zacharias and that related about Cornelius. Cornelius is a gentile, "a centurion of that which is called the Italian band; A religious man, and fearing God with all his house, giving much alms to the people, and always praying to God."³² His righteousness mirrors that of Zacharias but, like him, Cornelius is not yet under the new dispensation. An angel appears to him, and Cornelius "beholding him, being seized with fear" receives instructions to send men to fetch Simon Peter from a nearby town. His conversation with Peter leads to his conversion to Christianity (along with the conversions of several others) and he is baptized. It is worth noting the absence, in Cornelius' conversation with the angel, of the "fear not" formula. In every other case which we have examined, the visionary's initial reaction is addressed by the angel, who instructs him not to be afraid, because he bears good news (Manoah and Gideon are slightly exceptional, in that Manoah's wife performs this office for him, and God performs it directly for Gideon). Cornelius, however, is not comforted. Luke thereby emphasizes that the good news which should allay fear—the evangelium—is now brought by the apostles; all that the angel can do is to point him in the direction of Peter, in order to be able to hear the Word. With the establishment of Christianity, the Church assumes the comforting, ministering role which the angels had previously exercised. This same ecclesiology is reflected in the Pauline literature, where the angels are described as recipients of the ministry

31 Luke 2:9 The application of fear symbology to the shepherds may also be connected with the later rabbinical distrust of shepherds, found in the Babylonian Talmud, which stemmed from a belief that they dishonestly grazed their livestock on the lands of others. (Raymond E. Brown, "The Meaning of the Manger; The Significance of the Shepherds" in *Worship* 50, no. 6 (1976): 535.)

32 Acts 10:1-2

of the Church, and therefore subordinate to its mission in preaching the Christian message.³³

All of these examples demonstrate the ubiquity of the symbology of fear, used in both testaments to indicate individuals of weak faith, or, as in the cases of Zacharias and Cornelius, to indicate that a false faith is inhibiting the relationship of the individual to God. Two unusual cases, however, deserve special attention. The first is the story found in the Book of Numbers of Balaam and his ass. The story goes that, being called upon by King Balac of the Moabites to curse the Israelites invading his kingdom, Balaam initially refuses to give any prophecy not in accord with the word of the Lord which he receives. God instructs him not to go with Balac's messengers or to curse the Israelites, because they are blessed. When King Balac sends back the rebuffed messengers with offers of great rewards for giving the prophecy which Balac desires, Balaam is tempted, and invites the messengers to stay that night, in order that he might try God's will again. God then permits him to go with them, in order to let him entrap himself in his temptation.³⁴ It is written that "Balaam arose in the morning, and saddling his ass went with them. And God was angry. And an angel of the Lord stood in the way against Balaam, who sat on the ass, and had two servants with him."³⁵ Although Balaam is initially unaware of the angel's presence, it is noted by his ass, which turns out of the road. Balaam beats the ass and tries to redirect it, but it sidles itself up to a wall, bruising his foot. He beats the ass again, but it refuses to proceed any farther toward the angel who blocks their path, and it collapses beneath him. God then speaks through the ass, rebuking Balaam for his brutality, but Balaam is unsurprised and

33 Ephesians 3:10

34 Here I follow the interpretation given by the Douay-Rheims translators in their gloss on Numbers 22:19. Some scholars, such as George W. Coats (in "The Way of Obedience: Traditio-Historical and Hermeneutical Reflections on the Balaam Story" in *Semeia* 24 (1982): 54.), have contested this traditional reading. Even if their objections are granted, however, numerous other biblical references conspire to justify God's anger with Balaam. Joshua 13:22, for instance, refers to him as a diviner [qosem], which occupation is forbidden in Deuteronomy 18:10. Besides this, the events at Baal Peor are blamed on him in Numbers 31:8-16.

35 Numbers 22:21-2

unrepentant. "Forthwith the Lord opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel standing in the way with a drawn sword, and he worshipped him falling flat on the ground."³⁶ Although Balaam makes obeisance to the angel, it is never mentioned that he experiences any fear. The author here inverts the typical pattern for effect, in order to mock Balaam and highlight his folly. Whereas figures such as Manoah and Gideon are afraid when God is prepared to bless them, and therefore fear unnecessarily, Balaam experiences no fear precisely when he should, when God is angry. The ass is employed as a character to rebuke him, not only insofar as it is magically empowered to speak its recriminations, but also in that its appropriate dread of the angel demonstrates to the reader the fear which Balaam should have experienced; Balaam's ass is wiser and more attentive than he is, just as the brute beast is the rebuker of his brutality.³⁷

The other special circumstance is that of David and Jesus. Only these two figures encounter expressly malevolent angels, and both are distinguished by their utter lack of fear in circumstances that ought, by right, to have called it forth from any normal person.³⁸ David's vision comes following his numbering of the people, when he beholds the angel of pestilence which is sent against him. Upon seeing "the angel striking the people", however, David is not fearful, but rather is bold enough to remonstrate with God over the perceived injustice of the punishment.³⁹ The same story is later repeated in more dramatic form. The angel stops by the thrashing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, "And David lifting up his eyes, saw the angel of the Lord standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand, turned against Jerusalem:

36 Numbers 22:31

37 Following for the latter point, once again, the gloss of the Douay-Rheims translators. Numbers 22:28

38 Although the angel encountered by Balaam informs him that, had the ass not stopped his progress, he would have killed him, the opening of the mouth of the ass indicates its use by God as an instrument to effect Balaam's preservation. The angel's threat serves only as a means of intimidation and chastening, rather than as an indication of evil designs against the wayward soothsayer.

39 2 Kings [or 2 Samuel] 24:17

and both he and the ancients clothed in haircloth, fell down flat on the ground."⁴⁰ David, like many other characters of the Old Testament, makes obeisance before the angel, but no indication is given that he is afraid. Once again, he demonstrates great boldness in choosing this moment to remonstrate with God. The authorial intent in both instances is precisely to demonstrate that David is not a normal person; in this hagiography he is the man after God's own heart, who is so intimately connected with YHWH that even the presence of an angel sent explicitly on an errand of destruction cannot perturb him. In the latter account, David's mere presence reassures the elders. Unlike Daniel's companions, who flee the prophet's side at the apparition, the elders are fortified sufficiently by the king's presence to remain.

David's special trait is subsequently drawn upon by the evangelists to solidify Jesus' connection with his ancestor. Once again, Luke adroitly manipulates the angelophanical tradition to make his point. Jesus, already set apart from other men by "being full of the Holy Ghost"⁴¹ goes out into the desert where the Devil appears to tempt him. Jesus gives the reader the impression of total implacability, tossing aside Satan's temptations with witty comebacks drawn from Old Testament scripture. Matthew adds an additional note of defiance—where Luke's devil leaves Jesus simply because the temptation is ended, Matthew's leaves as a response to Jesus' stern rebuke, "Begone, Satan: for it is written, The Lord thy God shalt thou adore, and him only shalt thou serve."⁴² In both cases, Jesus is unflappable in the midst of an encounter with the malevolent angel *par excellence*, thereby demonstrating his descent from David, and his possession of the special traits of that line.⁴³

40 1 Paralipomenon [1 Chronicles] 21:16

41 Luke 4:1

42 Matthew 4:10

43 I find it reasonable to believe that early Christians would have seen Satan as an angel in their interpretation of

The symbology of fear is consistent throughout the Bible. In some stories, such as those of Manoah and Balaam, it is used to drive home established points about the spiritual weakness or folly of biblical characters. In others, such as those of Zacharias and Cornelius, it is employed as the sole subtle suggestion of less obvious barriers in the right relationship of men to God. In all cases, it makes powerful statements about the holiness of those who know God's favour, and teaches us that it is the righteousness of our own thoughts which determine whether the presence of the powers of heaven will be to us a comfort, or a tribulation.

this narrative. The connections between the Jewish apocalyptic literature in general and the New Testament are compellingly presented by scholars such as Ehrmann, and are sufficiently well known to stand in need of no enumeration here. More to the present point, the Epistle of Jude (14-15) testifies particularly to the currency of 1 Enoch in that community, at least some portion of which evidently regarded it on at least a near scriptural level. The 'fallen angel' motif as an explanation for supernatural evil would therefore have been familiar, if not assumed.

In the same vein, although the extra-canonical literature falls outside of the scope of our present investigation, it is worth noting the parallelism of Jesus' encounter with the account of the Book of Enoch. Enoch, like other righteous figures of the Tanakh, is unafraid when he receives visions of the angels of heaven, but he is also notably unafraid in his dealings with the fallen Watchers, whose cursed nature would seem to place them in the same malevolent camp as the angel of pestilence and the Devil. Indeed, it is the Watchers who are seized with "fear and trembling" (Enoch 13:3) when Enoch communicates God's word to them. Enoch holds, like David and Jesus, a place of particular veneration, being the man who "walked with God" and disappeared from the Earth when "God took him" (Genesis 5:24). The Book of Enoch uses the symbolism of fear to reinforce Enoch's special relationship with God, in the same way that a previous author used it for David and later authors used it for Jesus.

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Appendix

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