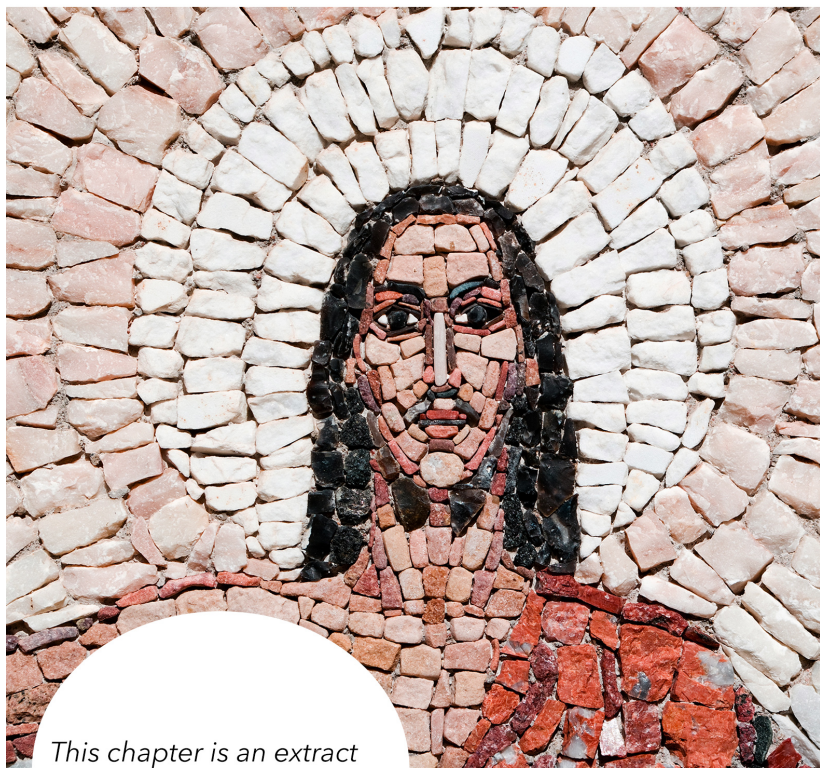


CHAPTER 7
THE TEST OF POSITIVE ACHIEVEMENT



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VERDICT

ON JESUS

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Test of Positive Achievement: Jesus and Morality

Let intellectual and spiritual culture progress and the human mind expand as it will, beyond the grandeur and moral elevation of Christianity, as it sparkles and shines in the Gospels, humankind will not advance.

Goethe

‘Only those are to be enshrined in the pantheon of heroes,’ declared Rafael Sabatini in *Heroic Lives*, ‘whose achievements influence posterity by the inspiration they supply, the traditions they have created, and the standards they have set.’

The mere mention of such criteria brings to our minds the incomparable pre-eminence of Jesus over all other claimants in history. So emphatically is this the case, that one notes that in any discussion of the world’s greatest people, it is customary to take for granted the surpassing eminence of Jesus, and to pass on at once to people of more measurable achievement. No competent mind questions that Jesus stands alone. Yet, is not this very fact more, and not less, reason for discussing him?

In our last chapter we were concerned with the historic march of Christianity as it has expressed itself through the agency of the Church. We now turn to the influence of Jesus as it has affected human attitudes towards the person.

As we set the Gospel against the background of history, a few general ideas about it arrest our attention. We see, for instance, that the teaching that Jesus gave to a handful of very ordinary people has been profound enough to bear the scrutiny of the world's brightest minds, and that it has been flexible enough to stand application in a thousand ways that were plainly beyond the immediate horizon of those who were his contemporaries.

In the brief compass of the Gospels, large parts of which contain duplications of both sayings and incidents, we have practically all that is available of Christ's life and teaching. Who would imagine that the most influential moral code, the most far-ranging philosophy, and the sublimest religious insights, could be contained in such slender records?

Anyone who has attained a mental grasp of the smallest facet of truth in science, ethics, philosophy, or religion, knows the difficulties of simplification, the pitfalls of oversimplification. Yet Jesus had the ability to pass the width of his wisdom through people of humble scholarship and limited perspective, so that what they were able to record, has remained an inexhaustible treasury for thought and application for two thousand years.

Jesus knew how far his teaching was ahead of his time. He realised that many ages must pass before the intelligence

and conscience of people would be able to rise to it. In the imagery of the seed growing secretly, and especially in the parable of the mustard seed, we are permitted to see his long-term patience. The mustard seed is small. It is liable to be overlooked, yet when it is grown to maturity, it is large and spreads out with generous branches. He implied that it was precisely the same with the seed of thought. For a time his words might be overlooked, but they would grow secretly and eventually become immensely fruitful.

The simile was brilliantly precise. The apprehension of the truth of Christ's words has been painfully slow. People have taken long centuries to rise to the thoughts of Jesus, yet when they have done so the results have been tremendously rewarding. When put to the test, no thought from the mind of Jesus has been found to lack the potency of life. Every saying has been germinal. Every principle he announced has proved capable of branching out into wide applications. Look where you will in the field of ideas and something of Jesus' sowing will meet the eye.

'From Jesus,' says Professor Latourette, 'have issued impulses that have helped to shape every phase of civilisation.' The word 'impulse' is well chosen, for the influence of Jesus, like the impulses from a beating heart, shows alternate periods of pause and pulsation with periods of quiescence followed by the periods of effective activity.

We pick up a few of those impulses as they have made themselves felt at different periods of history and we find them with the passage of time exerting an ever-growing pressure. The teaching of Jesus came to a world where ruthlessness and inequality were accepted, and where

children, women, and slaves counted for little. He brought a change.

One of the most revolting features of the world when Jesus was a boy was child murder. In a letter written in the twenty-ninth year of Caesar Augustus a worker, Hilarion, advises his wife, Alis, who was shortly to be confined, to throw the baby on the midden if she did not want it. He did not expect anyone to demur. In the cities of the Empire you could always pick up abandoned children and bring them up as slaves; or if girls, as worse than slaves. Some people made a living by trafficking in children. Among the Jews, higher estimates prevailed, but children were heavily subordinated to paternal rule, and often, as we gather from Paul (Col. 3: 21) harassed and broken in spirit.

In such an age, then, we understand the disciples' astonishment when Jesus took up children in his arms and blessed them. He was opening up a new era in which children were to be esteemed, not as chattels or so much livestock, but for their own sake, and as the heirs of Heaven.

But the changed attitude came slowly. Falls have been frequent. All the same, if we look back across history and imagine the course of it as an ascending spiral, we would find the ideals of Jesus tending to meet each circuit, as it were, at higher and wider levels.

The new view was in the mind of Gregory when he declared, as he watched the little children from Britain arriving as slaves in Rome, that 'they should be called not Angles but angels'. The monasteries gave practical expression to Christian estimates throughout the Dark and Middle Ages.

And as the centuries move on, we see Christian ideals getting ever wider and more efficient expression. Robert Raikes and Hannah More start village schools. Protests are heard against child-labour in field and factory. A barbarous practice of employing children as chimney sweeps gets abolished. Factory Acts are passed. People of deep Christian convictions like Charles Dickens and Kingsley plead the cause of children, or like Shaftesbury and Barnardo directly alleviate their lot.

Today, Christian estimates are taken for granted, even by those who themselves have no specific Christian theology, and the teaching first given in Galilee colours beneficent legislation, promotes clinical and educational facilities, and expresses itself in a general attitude of mind that is imaginable only in a country long nurtured in Christian traditions.

We turn now, to give a rapid glance at the elevation that Jesus had brought to the status of womanhood. Until the coming of Christian culture few knew what it was to be free, or to be treated of equal status with men. When Jesus confided in women some of the choicest truths of the Gospel, his disciples 'marvelled' that he talked with them. It was a novelty to see ordinary women sharing the higher thoughts of men. They were the lower species, so that even Socrates counted it a particular blessing, for which he thanked God three times a day, that he was a man and not a woman.

One has only to look at the present status and influence of women in countries that have known Christian influence, to

see that to half the human race Jesus has brought new life, distinction, and opportunity.

Proceeding naturally from the higher conceptions of manhood and womanhood, there has come into being an entirely new relationship between the sexes that has lifted the whole tone of human life. Mere force is seen as a sign of moral inferiority, while coarseness, brutality, and callousness, are revealed in their true colours.

Turn now to a third momentous change that Jesus has effected in human relationships.

Surprising as it may seem, neither the indifference to childhood nor the contemptuous view of womanhood, constituted the gravest blot on ancient civilisation, but rather the institution of slavery. Slavery offended the moral sensibilities of none. It was taken for granted. True, the Stoics taught a certain theoretical equality, but it was left entirely to the coming of the Christian spirit to put it into practice.

It is incredible to recall that the slave population of Rome greatly exceeded that of those who were free. Nor were slaves merely hewers of wood and drawers of water. They were sometimes educated people —tutors, philosophers, physicians, and state servants. Some managed to save enough to purchase their freedom, but the teeming majority had to remain among a class counted scarcely human. Cicero declared slaves to be ‘the excrement of humankind’.

But these were the people who from the first were admitted into the fellowship of the Church, ‘brothers’ as Paul put it,

‘for whom Christ had died’. Christian ideas began at once to cut the ground from beneath a system bound up with self-interest and immemorial custom. Before the New Testament closes we find Paul carrying the teaching of Jesus from the implicit to the explicit. He writes to a slave-owner,

laying down that the law of Christian brotherhood must determine his attitude to his run-away slave (Epistle to Philemon). He goes further. He announces the principle that ‘In Christ there is neither bond nor free’ (Gal 3: 28).

Slaves and prisoners were counted fair sport in the Roman arenas, but by the time of Telemachus a new reverence for human life was becoming general, so that when the monk gave his life to protest against men being butchered to provide a Roman holiday, public opinion was such that the gladiatorial shows were abolished.

The new reverence for life caused other changes. It humanised the slave laws in general and promoted a new sense of justice and moral responsibility.

About ad 360 the Emperor Theodosius allowed some seven thousand people to be massacred in Salonica without a trial. By this time Christian influence was of sufficient strength to enable Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, to impose an eight month’s discipline on the Emperor, and only allow him readmission to the Church on condition that he passed a decree that no capital sentence was to be carried out henceforth, without it being under consideration for a whole month. Theodosius agreed, and ‘with tears entreated pardon’.

Wherever Christ's Gospel went, a new attitude to the 'underdog' became apparent. In turbulent Northumbria, for instance, Aidan the monk (d. 651) used the money he received from the rich to redeem captives, many of whom became his disciples and were ordained by him. When Oswin rebuked him for giving away a horse that he had been given from the royal stables, Aidan's reply, while strange to modern ears, indicated the fervour with which many of the old saints insisted on Christian estimates. 'Is the son of a mare,' he blazed out, 'of more value in your eyes than a child of God?'²³

Such affirmations kept alive, and spread in rough days, the conscience that was, when come to maturity, to abolish the slave trade of modern times. It is hard to imagine today how monstrous was that traffic in human flesh and blood. British shipping alone conveyed over fifty thousand slaves a year from Africa to America—great numbers of whom died in transit. In 1727, however, the Quakers protested against the

*Merchants rich in cargoes of despair ;
Who drive a loathsome traffic gauge and span
And buy; the muscles and the bones of man.*

Their denunciations were taken up by the Evangelicals who with burning eloquence reminded people of the laws of Christ. When in 1833, Parliament indemnified the slave owners to the tune of twenty million pounds, the long maturing ideas of Jesus had brought forth fruit.

²³ *Dictionary of Church History*, Ollard and Crosse.

Many in our day are reluctant to face the piety of their forebears, but the minds of such as Wilberforce and Buxton were fired by Christianity and Christianity alone. They fought against something which Christ had taught them was a sin against humanity, and a denial of God's revealed will, and the slaves, too, knew under what inspiration their release had been effected.

'As the hour of the slaves' liberation struck,' says Walpole in his History of England, 'in every place of worship in the West Indian Colonies, a hymn of praise was raised to the God of the white man, the God of the black man, the God of the free.'

'The unwearying, the unostentatious and glorious crusade against slavery,' says Sadler, 'may be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages in the history of nations.'

Almost equally spectacular was the effort of Christian men and women to reform the prison system.

It is hard for us to envisage the horrors of gaol fever, the gross and demoralising conditions that John Howard and Elizabeth Fry combated. Prisoners who had already served their sentences had to bribe their gaolers to be released. Female prisoners, condemned to transportation, were hounded in chains across England, and then immured in the poisonous holds of ships on a nine months' voyage to Botany Bay. In England male prisoners were let into the women's quarters at night. In Botany Bay nothing awaited the unfortunate women but to be seized as mistresses, or as beasts of burden, by the roughest who boarded the boats.

‘The saints everywhere have made their dents upon the world,’ said Evelyn Underhill, and the impact of a great Christian like Elizabeth Fry is a notable instance. She shook the conscience of the world with her remedial measures, her prison libraries, working parties, educational classes; her reform of transport conditions, her provision for helpful activities for criminals at home and in Australia; and above all else, her personal influence, ‘patterned,’ as she said, ‘on the great Jesus—the exquisite tenderness of His ministrations, His tone and manner to sinners.’²⁴

We have now indicated, in concrete terms, something of what Jesus has done for children, women, and the slave, but such bald instances by no means do justice to the range and fineness of his work.

We are not attempting to pin-point the story of an ecclesiastical organisation but rather something of what has resulted from Jesus’ teaching entering the human conscience, for the real work of the Church is not the shaping of itself but rather the permeation of life and civilisation with the Christian conscience and spirit.

In order to get anywhere, we have to take a positive line. In presenting a thesis no scientist would concentrate on exasperating experiments that failed. They have to go to those that succeeded. Similarly, while we could deal with the tragic occasions when Christians have outraged the Christian spirit—as in the hideous third degree trials and burnings of the Inquisition—it seems right in a short sketch

²⁴ Quoted by Janet Witney, *Elizabeth Fry*.

to treat these as experiments that failed in understanding, tolerance, and pity, and concentrate on the individuals and occasions when a spirit shone out that could fairly be identified as 'the real thing'.

We turn therefore to indicate some individuals, and groups in which 'the real thing' can unmistakably be identified. One thinks of the spirit of the social and philanthropic work that commenced in the Apostolic Church when deacons were appointed to care for the widows and poverty-stricken (Acts 6). Wonderful again was the spirit that fell on those building Chartres Cathedral in 1144, when lords and ladies came from all over France to harness themselves alongside the masons and workers to pull the carts dragging stones from the quarry.²⁵ Daily, we are told, the wealthier folk came burdened with provisions that they all shared together, and all the hearts beat as one, and none had grudges or held back from the roughest work. Many hundreds of priests perished in the mid-fourteenth century in ministering to their plague-ridden parishioners; and heroic are the efforts of Christian doctors, teachers, and evangelists, both at home and in the mission fields of today.

Only in imagination, too, can we have any idea of the leavening of society that has been achieved by those noble individuals who, in contrast to the rank and file, have brought the spirit of Christ into daily life. Chaucer's picture of the saintliness of the 'poor parson of the town' would scarcely have been drawn if there had not been others like him in the fourteenth century, and a life like George Herbert's in the seventeenth century must have had a

²⁵ Sir Kenneth Clark, *Civilization*.

persuasive influence hard to estimate. 'He lived and died a saint,' wrote George Walton, 'unspotted from the world, full of alms-deeds, full of humility.' Or again, there comes to mind the inscription on Wilberforce's tomb in Westminster Abbey, 'There remains, and ever will remain, the abiding eloquence of his Christian life.'

Granted, of course, that only a sprinkling of Christ's followers have ever approximated to such excellences, yet, that a few in all ages have done so must be of significance, if only because they have set a standard, widely known and accepted as authentic, by which the remainder of Christ's followers have been judged. Only a resolute cynicism would make light of the steadfast courage of both Catholic and Protestant martyrs at the Reformation, or of the love for their fellows that distinguished Father Damien or General Booth, or of the effective evangelism of individuals as distinct as Hannah More, Wesley, the Studd brothers and Billy Graham, and Studdert Kennedy, as varied in spiritual technique as the Quakers, the Oxford Movement, or of the Churches of South India, or as united in essential purpose as the mediaeval guilds, and the Industrial Christian Fellowship. Yet plainly it is the same Lord they seek to proclaim and serve.

No thinking person can question the quality of Jesus' influence upon the human conscience. It is no exaggeration to say that as the warm Atlantic Drift mixes with icy waters and infuses them with life-giving warmth, so the quality of the Christian outlook has entered, at some time or another, most of the channels of human life. The Stream affects the temperature and climate in which millions live who know little of its hidden course. In the same way the consciences

that Jesus has enlivened, have produced an atmosphere which affects the relationships, attitudes, and judgments of millions who personally never enter a church.

Loisy could say in *La Morale Humaine* that 'the best thing in present-day society is the feeling for humanity that has come to us from the Gospels and that we owe to Christ'.

This 'feeling for humanity' has condemned purely utilitarian ideas, so that sickness and age, weakness and poverty, ignorance and injustice, have ceased to be matters of indifference, but have become challenges to amelioration and practical effort.

What this has meant on the scale on which Christianity has operated, no one can estimate, save to agree that Lecky tells part of the story in *History of European Morals*:

The simple record of Christ's short years has done more to soften and regenerate the heart of humanity than all the exhortations of moralists and all the disquisitions of philosophers. Christianity has covered the world with countless institutions of mercy utterly unknown in heathen lands.

In so far as there exists this feeling for humanity, we must see it as a consequence of the moral discipline and spiritual culture that past generations have voluntarily accepted. Inspired by Christianity, there have been those who have not been content to live haphazardly. They have taken themselves in hand directionally. They have shaped themselves by conscious evolution nearer the humanity and closer to the ideals of Jesus. By our time the results are

embedded in standards and assumptions, in attitudes and institutions, that only years of insulation from Christianity could wholly efface.

Meanwhile, based on the Christian estimate of personality, democratic attitudes and ideals have seen the light of day, safeguarding under democratic ways of life, the individual's place, rights, liberties, and responsibilities, in the scheme of things. There has been a sense of public and private duty; an ideal of wealth and power being a trust; a sense of responsibility towards backward peoples. People and societies being what they are, there have been lamentable breakdowns that have shamed the ideal, but a knowledge of the ideal has been widespread enough.

If today we are achieving fairer opportunities for all, better working conditions, and more equitable rewards, we are moving towards something that has always been implicit in the teaching of Jesus.

Or if, again, the fear of war is forcing us more and more to consider what is involved in human brotherhood and if that ideal of brotherhood can ever win political expression, Christians will have nothing new to put on their agenda. It has always stood there, and always offered itself for implementation.

Christ's thought spans the tardy centuries and is abreast, nay ahead, of the most realistic thinking of our day.

When Jesus released into the world the simple but profound idea of the individual's importance as a child of God, having a place here, and hereafter, in his Kingdom, and then made it unforgettable by dying for all on the Cross, the world

began to be a different place. If now we think that concern for the person is no more than good humanitarian sociology, and needs no religion to support it, we may find that concern growing less personal and more loveless, when the faith that originated it ceases to supplement 'natural' kindness.

The moral elevation of Christian thought would stand out in much bolder relief if we had not had, directly and indirectly, long familiarity with it. More than is realised, we have been conditioned by the momentum that Christianity has gathered in its unobtrusive passage from age to age.

An influence once given, a field of ideas once opened up, may become the property of people not directly in touch with the original inspiration, and they may underrate it, miss the source of it, mistake the end of it.

When Jesus gave to the world his conception of the Kingdom of God, he was sharing a comprehensive vision of the divine purpose, age-old, heaven-high, embracing every individual and the whole destiny of all, embracing all existence and the fulfilment of all being.

In Norse mythology we find life pictured as a tree, Yggdrasil, the Tree of Existence. Its roots are deep down. Its trunk reaches up heaven-high. Its boughs spread over the whole universe.

This image of the Northern mind, has achieved reality if we apply the illustration to Christianity. Recall Carlyle's words about Yggdrasil in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*:

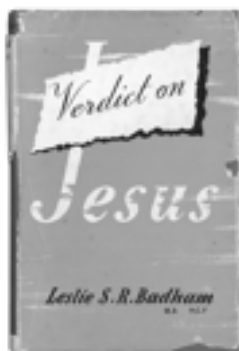
Its roots are watered from the Sacred Well. Its boughs, with their buddings, dis-leafings—things suffered, things done—stretches through all lands and times. Is not every leaf of it a biography, every fibre an act or word? Its boughs are histories of nations. The rustle of it is the noise of human existence, onwards from the old. It grows there the breath of human passion rustling through it; or storm tossed, the storm wind blinding through it like the voice of all the gods. It is the Tree of Existence. It is the past, present, and the future; what was done, what is doing, and what will be done...

Jesus has refreshed, as from a perennial spring, the very roots of human compassion and self-sacrifice. He has inspired, as has none other, a love that is ever branching out for the good of others. We may speak of promising boughs, hopeful twigs, innumerable leaves, a veritable Tree of Life, whose wood is in his cross, 'deep down, heaven-high'.

Is this what the Norse myth meant in its elemental way, about Yggdrasil, Tree of Existence, and what the Cross means positively, with its compassion, and its caring, and its call to care?

7 Decades

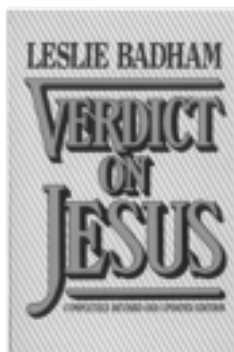
Verdict on Jesus through the years



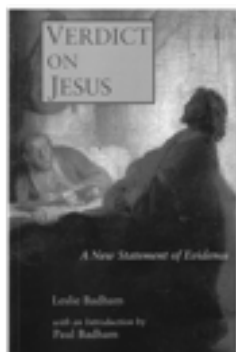
1950



1971



1983



1995



2010



2020

Leslie Badham

Author of Verdict on Jesus

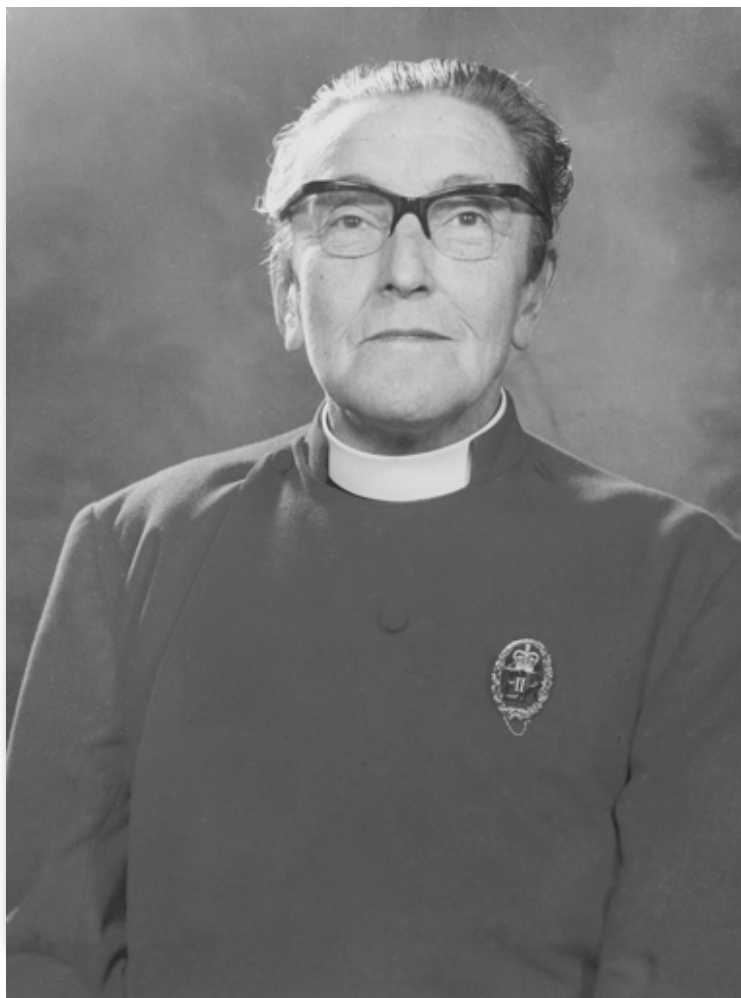


Top left: Leslie Badham with Effie, his fiancée, at her graduation from the LSE in 1935

Top right: Leslie and Effie Badham with their children David, Christine, Clare and Paul in 1963

Middle: Leslie Badham with Queen Elizabeth II at Windsor Parish Church in 1965

Bottom left: Leslie Badham RAF Chaplain 1940-45



Leslie Badham (1908–75)

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