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GENESIS 1:1 - 2:4A: WORLD PICTURE AND WORLD VIEW

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Abstract

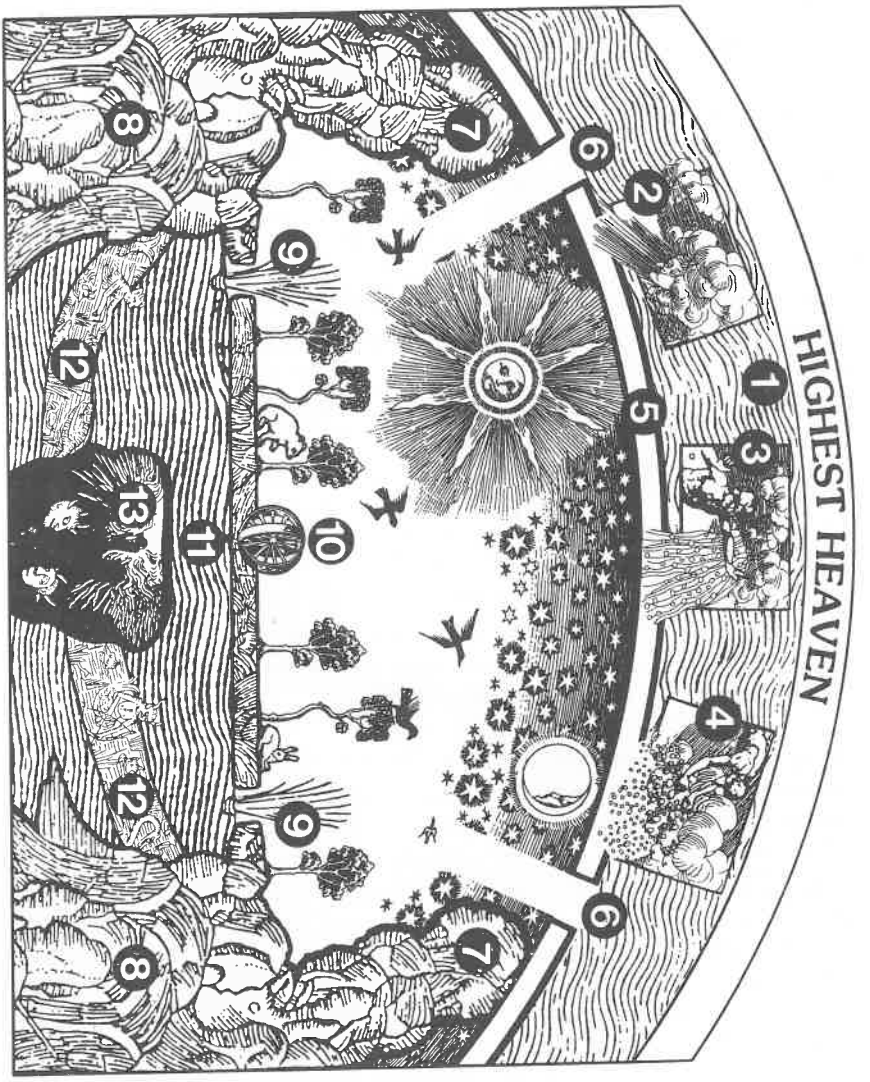
The Biblical creation narrative (Gn 1) is often depicted as a scientific statement about the creation of the world, and as such held to be a divinely inspired alternative to theories of (natural) evolution. This article seeks to understand the creation narrative in its literary and cultural context, and to grasp its appeal to its readers. A distinction is made between the world picture and the world view reflected by the text, and it is argued that it is precisely the world view presented to us in the text that challenges modern mechanistic and naturalistic **views** of the world.

'Man cannot live without seeking to describe and explain the universe', Sir Isaiah Berlin once remarked. This is borne out by the numerous ancient Near Eastern accounts of the origin and meaning of the world. The Biblical creation narrative, which was committed to writing some time between 900 and 500 B C, cannot be treated in isolation from the world pictures and world views then current in the Near East. Attempts to make the Biblical creation narrative 'fit' the findings of the modern natural sciences, or to make the Biblical account the criterion for scientific theories on the origins of the earth (cf Aalders 1932), generate unnecessary conflict between religion and science, faith and reason, and are trapped in an essentialistic theory of literature and a positivistic approach to science. They are also manifestly unjust to the Biblical writers by isolating them from the context in which they lived, with their static, pre-Ptolemaic world picture, and pitting them against the scientists of the post-Einstein era, so ensuring that the Biblical narratives are completely misunderstood and are consequently discredited and ignored.

To understand what Genesis 1 is actually about, we must a) understand the writer as a child of his time, and b) take the text itself seriously, and not impose our era and our desires (as regards what the text 'ought' to have said) on it. To understand the writer against the background of his time, we must know something of the then current (Semitic) world picture. And to understand his text, we must know something of a) the techniques of literary composition he applied and b) the views of his contemporaries on the meaning of the world.

A. The general Semitic world picture of the time

A sketch will greatly shorten our discussion of this subject (cf Sarna 1970:5):



1. The water above the earth/firmament (cf Gn 1:6; Ex 20:4)
2. The storehouse of the wind (Ps 135:7)

3. The storehouse of the snow (Job 38:22; Is 55:10)
4. The storehouse of the hail (Job 38:22)
5. The firmament (Gn 1:7)
6. Thw windows of heaven (Gn 7:11; 8:2; Is 24:18
7. The pillars/foundations of the heavens/firmament (2 Sm 22:8)
8. The pillars/foundations of the earth (Ps 82:5; Is 24:18)
9. The fountains of the deep (Gn 7:11; 8:2)
10. The centre of the earth (Ezk 38:12; Is 19:24)
11. The waters under the earth (Ex 20:4)
12. The rivers of the underworld (Ps 46:4; Jnh 2:3
13. The underworld/Sheol (Jnh 2:2; Job 11:8; 17:16)

This world picture, which was shared by the writers of the Old Testament, was based on general observation and naive logic: because rain, hail and snow fall 'out of the sky', it is logical that in the sky, above the dome of the firmament, there must be copious stores of water (1), snow (3) and hail (4). When the windows in the firmament (6) are opened, the contents of the storehouses fall to earth (Gn 7:11; Ml 3:10), and when God closes them, there is drought (Gn 8:2; Dt 11:17). In order to be able to support such a volume of water, the firmament must rest on something, namely the foundations or primeval mountains (7).

Moreover, because spring water (9) continually bubbles up from under the earth, there must also be a quantity of water stored under the earth (11 - Gn 7:11). This has two logical consequences: first, if the earth rests on a quantity of water, it must be well-anchored. It must therefore rest on pillars (8) with strong foundations. Secondly, unlike the rain (which falls briefly and at [lengthy] intervals), spring water flows constantly out of the earth and flows away. This underground water must therefore have a source somewhere. Hence the idea that this source is constantly fed by two rivers (12). But where do these rivers obtain their water? From the abode of the supreme God El, was the answer of the Ugaritic mythology 1). And

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1) Cf 2 Aqht VI:47-49:
(lttn pn)m. 'm il. mbk!. nhrm

this representation of the world stil echoed in the metaphors of Psalm 46:3,5-6 2).

How did all this originate? This question is answered in numerous creation narratives from the ancient Near East, including the Babylonian **Enuma elis** and the **Atrahasis** Epic. All of these narratives - including the Biblical narratives - speak of the creation of the world **in terms of** the general Semitic world picture (cf Deist 1982:11-15). All proceed from the supposition that there was initially only a mass of water, that the gods inserted the firmament 'between' the water and raised the one half while pressing down the other; that the gods separated dry land and water, etc 3). The

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(qrb apq) thmtm tgly. śd il
(wtbu qrṮs. mlk. ab Ṯnm

She turns to EL
at the source of the Two Rivers
in the midst of the streams of
the two Depths.
She enters the **abode of** El,
Father of the Years/Time.

2) See for example the reference to the 'mountains' (foundations of the earth) which shake/tremble in the 'sea' (the primeval water), and so threaten the earth (Ps 46:2) and how God's abode is represented as beside a 'river' (Ps 46:4-5).

3) See Kramer (1963:113) on the Sumerian representations (dating from between 4500 and 1750 B C):
'First, they concluded, there was the primeval sea; the indications are that they looked upon the sea as a kind of first cause and prime mover, and they never asked themselves what preceded the sea in time and space. In this primeval sea was somehow engendered the universe (that is 'heaven-earth'), consisting of a vaulted heaven superimposed over a flat earth and united with it. Between them, however, came the moving and expanding 'atmosphere' which separated heaven and earth. Out of this atmosphere were fashioned luminous bodies, the

parallels between Genesis 1 and the **Enuma elis**. for example, are so pronounced that some Old Testament critics in the previous century even considered the Biblical writer guilty of 'plagiarism' (cf Deist 1982:15). If we are merely interested in how the people of that time saw the world, and their thinking on the origins of the earth, we could read ány of these narratives. In terms of their world picture, they did not differ.

To haul the writer of Genesis 1 out of this milieu and parade him arm in arm with Darwin, Einstein and Heisenberg is unfair and unethical.

However, just as today, despite a relatively uniform world picture, there are different world views, so it was in Biblical times. This is where the Biblical or canonical Israelite narratives differ greatly from the narratives around them. And to discover the world view of Genesis 1, we must study the text itself and then compare it with other views of the world that were then current.

B. The construction and composition of Genesis 1

Genesis is a piece of artistic prose (bordering on poetry). Here a (priestly) narrative artist was at work. To understand whát he was saying, we must for a moment consider hów he tells his story. The following schematic outline can be useful here (Pohl 1958/9:253):

Heaven and earth ... (unmoving things)		
Day	Act	Events
1	1	Separation: Light Darkness

moon, sun, planets, and stars. Following the separation of heaven and earth and the creation of the light-giving astral bodies, plant, animal and human life came into existence'.

		Naming
2	II	Separation: Water above
		Water below
		(Firmament)
		Naming
3	III	Separation: Earth
		Water
		Naming
	IV	Creation: Plants

...and all theirs hosts (2:1) (Moving things)		
Day	Act	Events
4	V	Creation: Day and Night lights
5	VI	Creation: Birds above Fish below
6	VII	Creation: Animals of the earth
	VIII	Creation: Man
7		Rest

We can now use this scheme to read the hów of the text along with its content. The hów is not just there for artistic effect. It is the códe within which the writer sets his narrative, a code we must respect.

C. Approximating the content of Genesis 1

1. The function of the 'days'

There has been an immense amount of written and verbal debate about the so-called 'days' of Genesis 1: some want the days to be like ours, twenty-four hours. Others seek to read the eras of some or

other evolutionary theory into the days to fit Genesis into modern theories. The writer might well be amused by all this and say: 'But man, a day is just a day!' We could hit back with: 'But how could there be a day before the sun was created?' And he would answer: 'Must one be logical in a poem? Don't you understand what you are reading?' And he would be right in reacting like this, for he has given us the key: he has simply **worked from** a seven day scheme. Everyone around him knew the seven day week, with the seventh day as a day of rest. In fact, the day of rest was precisely his 'proof' that **God** had made the heavens and the earth 4).

It is also interesting to note that in the ancient Near East the number seven was an important symbol, denoting 'completeness'. So it was often used in what are called step parallelisms, and as a stylistic device in narratives. In Proverbs we often read: 'Three things are, yes four.' Here the number seven is divided into unequal parts (3 + 4), so that the fourth element mentioned stands out as the

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4) P J van Dyk (1985) has shown how this sort of narrative logic operates in the Old Testament: a story is linked to a familiar/verifiable phenomenon, e g a heap of stones, a soecific feature of the landscape, a particular group of people, etc. Because this phenomenon forms the 'logical' conclusion of the narrative, it **appears** that the narrative merely explains the phenomenon (these stories often conclude : '...for this reason...'), but in reality the demonstrable phenomenon (the Sabbath in Genesis 1) **functions** as a 'proof' that the preceding narrative is 'true'. Van Dyk found that such narratives generally communicate a master symbol, and are so attempting to use the 'proved' story to persuade the hearer/reader to internalise the view/attitude implicit in the master symbol. So where Genesis 1 culminates in the sabbath, the writer is saying: 'As surely as there is a sabbath, my story is true. So accept what I am telling you and see the world arond you in this way.'

most typical feature of that specific category of things, 5) a scheme which we could represent as follows:

	4
3	3
2	2
1	1

In Ugaritic narratives we also find the following scheme: 'Set out: a day, a second day, a third, a fourth day, a fifth, a sixth day, and see! At sunrise on the seventh you come to Udum (Krt 105ff). Seven becomes a symbol of achieving a goal, of completion.

Although in the diagram showing the 'structure' of Genesis 1 the seventh day may appear to be an appendage, it is the eventual climax of the narrative, as well as the motivation for its content (cf Deist 1982:21-22 and footnote 4).

So while theologians and other scientists sit and haggle about the length of his days (which are taken to be anything from twenty-four hours to a few million years), they are misreading the poet's entire **code**, and so misunderstanding and abusing his text. Naturally he meant: seven literal days. But then he could not have imagined that we would later want to fit his simple world picture into a radically different and scientifically researched world picture - still less that two thousand years later his text would be discussed at scientific symposia on the origins of the earth. For he did not mean it this way. He would be happy were we to admire his poetic skill or share his world **view**, but when we admire him for the remarkable way his

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5) Compare

> Three things are too wonderful for me;
> four I do not understand:
> the way of an eagle in the sky, (gliding without flapping its wings)
> the way of a serpent on a rock, (moving without feet)
> the way of a ship on the high seas, (without wheels)
> and the way of a man with a maiden (no reason for love).

world **picture** fits in, he would probably complain with Jean Cocteau: ‚The greatest tragedy for a poet is to be admired though misunderstood'. So what was he intending to say in his piece of artistic prose?

2. Separation and naming

In the scheme set out above, it is striking that in the first three days (excluding act IV, to which we will return later), things are separated from one another and then the things separated are given names. This reveals two things which were important to the writer.

a) While most of the ancient Near Eastern narratives of this kind are actually theogonies, and thus explain where all the gods come from and how their functions are divided, so ascribing divinity to cosmic forces such as water, air, light and earth, here the cosmic forces are presented as the products of a single divine 'fiat'. In doing this, the writer not only (negatively) criticises the deification of cosmic forces, but (positively) he sets these things under the authority of **one** God, as we will see later still more clearly. The people of the ancient Near East saw creation as the product of titanic and bloody disputes between the cosmic forces (gods), and so feared that the equilibrium achieved could break down at any time and primeval chaos could again return. So they regularly repeated their rituals to preserve equilibrium Genesis 1 shows this fear of the cosmos to be superstition by confessing that all these forces come from the ordering hand of one God, and are under his control. Genesis 1 thus views the world from a position of confidence.

Why was this confession necessary? Because many Israelites also lived in fear of natural forces and so preferred to serve nature gods such as Baal and Astarte. So even some of the writer's countrymen were convinced that the cosmic forces (personified in the Bible by names such as Yam [sea], Nahar [river], Leviathan, Rahab and Tannin) were still in conflict, so that chaos might return at any moment (compare Is 27:1; 51:9-10; Job 26:12-13 with Ps 104:9; Pr 8:27; Job 26:10; 38:8-11). The writer of Genesis 1 sought to reach them with his gospel of trust.

b) The second important matter in the series of actions on the first three days is that according to this narrative God gave names to the things he separated. At that time naming was of vital importance, and affected three aspects of reality:

1. Things which did not have names, simply did not exist, or conversely, what had a name, existed. The Babylonian **Enuma elis** narrative thus begins: 'When the heaven above had no name (i e was not there) and the fixed earth had not yet been named (i e was not yet there) ...' When God names things, he makes them real. So the writer is saying that the fact that anything exists, is thanks to God. He gave things their names.

2. As part of reality, things with names were part of the order of reality. So: what did not have a name, was part of chaos, and what had a name, was part of order. The 'science' of the time consisted in fact of arranging the names of things in groups in lenghthy lists to form logical or orderly wholes (today we refer to this as onomastica). It was said of Solomon that he knew the full list of names of the flora: , ... from the cedar that is in Lebanon tot the hyssop that grows out of the wall' and that he also knew the name list of the fauna, namely the lists of 'beasts, and of birds, and of reptiles and of fish' (1 Kn 4:33). It is interesting that Genesis 1 also mentions beasts, birds, reptiles and fish, and always adds: 'according to their kinds'. The 'kinds' had nothing to do with the modern biological concept of species, but with the categories in the lists in which these things were catalogued. Instead of naming the entire list, the writer could simply say 'trees, each according to its kind'- the reader could add the rest if he had something of Solomon's knowledge 6).

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6) The Egyptian **Onomastikon of Amenope**, for example, contains a creation catalogue listing 610 items in creation in order, and a Sumerian list, giving the order of cultural phenomena, contains more than one hundred items. The 'logic' of the 'kinds' is often obscure to us today. It is possible that Psalms such as Psalms 8 and 104 contain traces of such lists. Compare the system of creation 'listed'

The fact that God named things, thus also says that he ordered them, so that the order that the 'lists science' discovered in nature was not accidental, but designed. So man is merely discovering what God has done.

3. However, the naming of things also indicates that the the Namer has authority over the things named. Just as in Genesis 2 man demonstrates his power over animals by giving them names, and as Nebuchadnezer demonstrated his power over Daniel and his three friends by giving them new names, so Genesis 1 declares that all visible things are under the power and authority of God.

3. Separation and creation

There is another interesting fact which strikes us in the scheme of Genesis 1. While the first three days are concerned with the creation of unmoving things, the second set of three days deals with the origins of moving things: light, heaven, earth, water, land and plants are the unmoving things in contrast to the heavenly bodies, animals and birds, fish and man which are moving things. Obviously this reflects something of the classification systems of the time. But there is more to the distinction between unmoving and moving than mere classification. There is also a certain logic in it: the four commodities created in the first three days are the preconditions for the origin of the four moving things in the second set of three days: the moving sun, moon and stars cannot shine without the unmoving light. The birds cannot fly without the heavens. Fish cannot live without a sea. Animals too cannot live without land. And man cannot live if there are not both the unmoving things and food: this is why the creation of plants as the fourth act stands opposite the creation of man as the eighth act (see the structure diagram). Yet there is still more here than mere logic.

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in Psalm 104: light, heavens, storerooms, clouds, wind, lightning, earth and its foundations, primeval waters, mountains and valleys, springs, birds, grass and edible plants, trees, wild animals, moon and sun, darkness, man, sea and sea animals.

This arrangement of the narrative material also makes vital statements of faith - statements which make more sense against the background of Old Testament times.

The first statement relates to the fact that the sun, moon and stars do not have their own light, but merely house the light of the first divine fiat. In a world in which sun gods such as Shamash and Ra were so important, in a world in which the moon and stars were worshipped as natural forces and saviours 7),the statement in Genesis 1 must have been amazing: the sun, moon and stars are not independent sources of power and have no power in themselves: their light comes from elsewhere. They are simply God's markers of time, time without which human history is inconceivable.

The second statement relates to the fact that God has incorporated the ability to procreate and the gift of growth in the plant and animal kingdoms. In a world in which men believed that all sorts or fertility rites, including sacred prostitution in temples, were necessary to ensure fertility, this statement would ring out clearly:

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7) The story of the sun which ,'stood still' at Gibeon is sometimes also explained with reference to the Canaanite worship of the sun and moon (evidence for which has been found among the Horite population of Gibeon - Heller 1958:652-654). On this view, the original text of Josua's prayer would have read:
'Sun, be still in Gibeon
and moon, in Aijalon.'
(Here 'stand still' is an incorrect translation.)

The prayer would then be that the gods should not give any oracles to the enemy. A later editor would then have altered the 'offensive' words in the mouth of a folk hero to produce a miracle.

In Israel itself the star gods were worshipped up to the time of Jeremiah (Jr 7:18; 44:17,18,19), so that at the time the ,demythologising' of the heavenly bodies was indeed very important.

gods and natural forces such as Baal and Astarte were not responsible for procreation, but it was a built-in feature of the plant and animal kingdoms (hence the emphasis on plants with their own seed in them). Just as it is no longer divine powers which give the sun its light, and the sun is demythologised (as purely an indicator of human time), so procreative forces are demythologised from mysterious forces to be worshipped to merely an ability created in a plant, an ability which is also put there in order to serve man (to feed him).

The third statement is indubitably the most important, and is the statement that God cares. Before he made moving things, he ensured that they would be able to survive, he created a living space for them, and ensured that all the conditions for life were met (hence the classification of all moving, that is, living things together in the second set of three days.)

In this regard the creation of man is extremely important. In the Babylonian narratives, man was made to serve the gods. In fact, the gods were so dependent on human sufferings that when these once ceased, the gods simply starved, and -- so the story goes - when the scent of the first offerings ascended again after this, the gods gathered 'like flies' around the sacrifice to savour the smell. Consequently the Babylonian narrative culminates in the building of a temple, where man could serve the gods with offerings. Man is as it were condemned to serve.

But in Genesis 1, the position is radically different. Man is the very last of God's creations. Then comes evening and morning, and the seventh day dawns, the seventh day which, as we have seen, is actually the climax of the story. On the first day of his life, so the narrative states, man did no work at all. And yet he lived. God cared. People do not care for God, God cares for people. It is not God who depends on man for his life, but man who is dependent on God for life and its preservation. For this reason God cannot be manipulated by offerings or by ceasing to make offerings.

While we are dealing with man, we might as well consider more of the narrative's vision of man.

4. The creation of man

What have theologians and other scientists not deduced from or read into the few verses on the creation of man! And actually the few verses on man in Genesis 1 are extremely simple. What does the writer say?

a) Here God first called a halt and took counsel in the courts of heaven (cf Ps 82:1; Job 2:1).

b) Then God decided to create something like himself, to make a small image of himself to manage the earth he had made.

c) Then, on the same day on which he made the animals, God made this small image - or images, for he made them as male and female beings - and commanded them to manage his good creation.

This is how concretely it is presented, but a presentation has a meaning. It says: although man is and acts very much like an animal, there is still a qualitative difference between them: it was only the creation of man that required consultation, only man who is in the image of God (cf Ps 8:51) and only man who received a cultural mandate. To the writer, this was what distinguished man from the animals: his close ties to God and his responsibility and accountability to God set him apart.

D. So what do we now say about Genesis 1?

Genesis 1 simply accepts the world picture of the age in which it arose, but polemizes against the world view of its time by demythologising the cosmos, presenting it as a place which need not be feared, but can be trusted because it is God's world which he has given to man to develop, study and protect. But man has limitations: in a sense, even though he is in God's image, he is also part of created reality, as it were among the animals. So he is not a law unto

himself, but stands under the law of God. Similarly, the forces and order of nature which he discovers in his onomastical science are not merely natural forces, but created forces. By demythologising the cosmos, he eliminates fear and anxiety. By establishing the cosmos as part of the divine fiat, and presenting it as under the ordering and caring hand of God, he seeks to substitute trust for anxiety and fear, create an area of confidence in which man can come into his own as a developer, guardian and student of nature. Through the way in which he represents man, he says that man's work in development and protection must be undertaken as a command of God and from the rest of God. Recognition of the command and acceptance of the rest respectively eliminate man's pride in and anxiety about his work.

So Genesis 1 has everything to do with a world view and nothing to do with physical origins. Today we know far more than the writer of Genesis did about the origins of the world, and our world picture is far more sophisticated than his. Yet even today his text still issues an invitation to us - to link arms with his world view, to replace our anxiety about the world with his rest in faith.

Einstein once said that 'Faith without science is lame, and science without faith is blind'. The science of Genesis 1 would probably have kept our faith permanently paralysed; but without the faith of Genesis 1, our science will probably remain blind forever.

To force the world picture of Genesis 1 into our scientific world pictures, or to force our world picture onto that of Genesis 1, is harmful both to the text and to science. But if we permit the light of the world view of Genesis 1 to illuminate our science, we can help to demythologise our scientific ideology, to temper our pride, and remove the anxiety from our labour, so enabling us to pursue our exciting quest into the origins and growth of the earth responsibly from the seventh day's rest.

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