

The Portrait of Isaac in Genesis 27: Between Synchronic and Diachronic Readings of Patriarch's Character

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Abstract: Modern critical reception characterizes patriarch Isaac as a particular character type: the schlemiel. This article provides a tour through the cumulative evidence for this comedic read, focusing on Genesis 27, the blessing of Jacob. It provides a revised narratological and literary context, arguing that Isaac's fivefold questioning demonstrates not confusion, but awareness: he knows exactly which son is in front of him. The paper presents an alternative narratological and literary context for Isaac, framing his questions in terms of the editing process: a synchronic reading of Isaac's acumen is corroborated by evidence from diachronic reading. The redaction history of the Isaac material in chapter 26 yields a number of points suggesting the dependence of the Abraham material on the Isaac narrative. A number of features indicate a stronger, less subordinate Isaac figure based on the earlier tradition revealed by a complex transmission history than the image arising from the mainstream synchronic reading of chapter 27 seems to depict.

Keywords: biblical interpretation, patriarchal narratives, history of reception, Isaac

The patriarch Isaac has received significant scholarly attention in the past three decades, being allotted a consistent theatrical type: the schlemiel. The *consensus scholarum* is that the Genesis account conveys a sense of undeniable passivity, dull-wittedness, even comicality about Isaac.¹ He is viewed as a subordinate link and a comic relief figure between the personages of Abraham and Jacob. The reception of the second patriarch as a fool, especially in its schlemiel variety, is basically unanimous among biblical commentators.

On closer inspection, however, Isaac's overall portraiture is much more nuanced. Elizabeth Boase has traced the redactional history behind Genesis 26, uncovering some earlier layers in the textual palimpsest. Boase suggests that there is a transitivity of traditions between Isaac and Abraham in general, and a different, more influential

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¹ For a detailed walk-through of Isaac's biography from Genesis from the perspective of the incongruity theory of humor, see Boase, "Life in the Shadows" and Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope." See also the writings of Dennis D. Sylva.

Isaac, in particular.² To Boase, the contrasting images of the patriarch arise out of different traditions, revealed by synchronic and diachronic readings respectively:

The synchronic reading suggests that the subordination lies in Isaac's character portrayal. ... The diachronic reading traced something of the redactional history of the Isaac material in chapter 26, suggesting that traditions had transferred from Abraham to Isaac, but also from Isaac to Abraham. This suggests that at one time Isaac was less subordinate than as now presented.³

The present article aims to demonstrate that this presumption of the former glory of Isaac, verified by Boase's meticulous diachronic reading, is an important theoretical basis for advocating the possibility of—and even evidence for—a non-simplistic understanding of Isaac's character through close synchronic reading of Genesis 27.

1. The Overview of the Comic Aspect of Isaac

We shall proceed by tracing the trajectory of the key characteristics and episodes that sketch Isaac as a dull, weak, or comical figure. Most scholarly testimonies see the uncomplimentary view of Isaac throughout Genesis, as is well summed up by Boase: "He [Isaac] presents as a shadowy, ill-defined and subordinate figure whose actions closely resemble those of Abraham."⁴ Indeed, with the exception of chapter 26, all the episodes in which Isaac appears are those in which others are central characters. He is depicted as a largely passive figure dumped in the midst of events, as someone whose actions comply with the plans implemented by others. Boase points out an important textual detail that speaks much about Isaac's subordinate character position: he is nearly always referred to by his filial title, "the son." Isaac is thus defined by his affiliation with Abraham, depriving him of individuality and underscoring his symbolic rather than personal status.⁵

When scholars do find Isaac as having a personal identity, they generally see him as the book's fool. Joel Kaminsky, for instance, emphasizes the element of schlemiel humor in Isaac's portrayal. Kaminsky sees Isaac's depiction from early childhood in chapter 21 (the great party thrown at the weaning of the child) as one of someone in need of protection, vulnerable, a distinctly humanized portrait: "Indeed, it seems that this incident contains the first hint of Isaac's schlemiel quality:

² Boase ("Life in the Shadows," 328) notes, "A number of points suggest the dependence of the Abraham material on the Isaac narrative."

³ Boase, "Life in the Shadows," 333–334.

⁴ Boase, "Life in the Shadows," 312.

⁵ Boase, "Life in the Shadows," 315.

he is the 'active disseminator of bad luck.' The schlemiel Isaac, intending no harm to anyone, causes Sarah to demand that Abraham expel Hagar and Ishmael from their household."⁶ In the context of Isaac's personality, this feast could also be considered the first comical adventure: Ishmael overshadows his stepbrother in whose honor the party is given, and Isaac has to rely on his mother's intervention and protection. Kaminsky argues that this scene opens a series of episodes in which Isaac plays a passive role, as others use him with respect to their own needs and thereby shape his future.

Isaac is, in the words of Chris Danta, generally read "from the point of view of the incongruity of humor ... an incarnation of laughter."⁷ This nature is tied to the very meaning of Isaac's name, "he laughs," writes J. William Whedbee:

His name ... bespeaks his character and destiny, but in a different sense from what such a happy appellation might initially suggest. Apart from the one occasion of his birth, Isaac is not usually the source of joyous laughter, nor is he a clever wit himself. Again and again he is laughed over ... often ... even duped. ... Lastly, the characterization of Isaac as passive victim is best construed as comic. A hallmark of his role is his ordinariness; in all these ways he is a comic figure familiar to us all ... laughable.⁸

George Kovacs and C.W. Marshall tie these moments of ridicule to their cursory meta-characterization of the contemporary perspective of Isaac as "postmodern takes on classical and Judeo-Christian figures and events (including Isaac, Prometheus, Athena, and the Flood)."⁹

In her thorough tour of the Isaac episodes surveying Isaac's dimwittedness, Boase aptly notes that in chapter 22 Isaac disappears from the scene of "the Binding of Isaac" as soon as he is saved.¹⁰ The reader is never told that he is coming back with Abraham, which further emphasizes his symbolic position in the narrative. What has been Isaac's role here? Apparently, he had been used as an object through whom Abraham was tested; once the trial was over, there came no further need for him within the narrative. Moreover, even the story of the binding of Isaac contains certain schlemiel elements, if one takes into consideration the entire context of the Isaac narrative. The fact that he is willing to carry the wood, his question to Abraham after three days of travel about the absence of a sacrificial animal, and his silence after Abraham's answer perhaps all imply certain slow-wittedness rather than simple innocence and compliance. Certainly, such a reading emerges not based

⁶ Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope," 367.

⁷ Danta, "Sarah's Laughter," 350.

⁸ Whedbee, *Comic Vision*, 92–93.

⁹ Kovacs – Marshall, *Son of Classics and Comics*, xvii.

¹⁰ Boase, "Life in the Shadows," 317.

on this episode alone, but on the *cumulative evidence* of his appearances throughout Genesis.¹¹

In chapter 24, “Isaac is the passive recipient of a wife.”¹² His absence is quite conspicuous. This chapter, like the forthcoming 26, is again full of subtle hints at Isaac’s slow wit and comicality. At the beginning, Abraham delegates his servant to find a wife for Isaac, who has lost his mother by this time (yet she will figure post-mortem in this chapter, fulfilling her protective maternal role once again). In verses 1–9, not only does Abraham send the servant to find a wife for his son, but he also stresses that Isaac must not under any circumstances leave the land of Israel and go to Mesopotamia: Abraham demands of his servant, “Make sure that you do not take my son back there” (v. 6), and, “Only do not take my son back there,” (v. 8). Both Isaac and Jacob find wives in Haran, but what a contrast! Jacob is trusted (allowed? qualified?) to go there, whereas Isaac is explicitly prohibited from leaving the land. Later in chapter 26, this theme appears again, when God prohibits Isaac from going to Egypt (“Do not go down to Egypt,” v. 2). The literary departure of Isaac from the patriarchal motif of leaving the land is significant in light of his personality. The obvious implication of this prohibition is that both God and Abraham worry about Isaac’s ability to succeed—or perhaps even to survive the perils of the journey. The complementary bothersome aspect of the prohibition is the fact that Isaac is not entrusted the quest for his own wife. The text might suggest that he did not even know about the journey’s mission—“Then the servant told Isaac all he had done” (v. 66)—but, in accordance with his compliant personality, he marries this stranger. Perhaps Abraham (and God) are concerned not only about Isaac’s own inability to make the journey and fulfill the mission, but are worried that the bride would refuse to marry Isaac were she to meet him in the first place, as Kaminsky suggests.¹³

More elements of comedy in this chapter follow: the servant’s test involves asking a woman to draw water both for him and the camels, a test that proves her eligibility as the wife of his master’s son. The test might be essential, yet it is quite elementary, and Rebekah is the first person to take and to pass it right away. The marriage is “consummated” in the presence of Sarah’s shadow, when Isaac brings his young wife into Sarah’s tent: “and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death” (v. 67). Isaac is the only biblical character to bring his new wife to his mother’s tent.¹⁴

¹¹ For an insightful discussion and elaboration on Kaminsky’s methodology of cumulative evidence for determining the comic in the Bible, see the introduction of Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation*.

¹² Boase, “Life in the Shadows,” 317. In discussing this contrasting feature of passivity (Isaac vs. Abraham and Jacob who find their own wives), Kaminsky (“Humor and the Theology of Hope,” 368) is tempted to refer to the modern medical theory that would account for “a diminished mental capacity” as a result of the incestuous union. That would fall out of the scope of the “schlemiel umbrella” qualities!

¹³ Kaminsky, “Humor and the Theology of Hope,” 368.

¹⁴ Kaminsky, “Humor and the Theology of Hope,” 370.

Chapter 26 is the third in the famous series of wife-sister episodes, in which Isaac is the protagonist. Here, Isaac closely replicates the patterns set by his father Abraham in Egypt and in Abimelech's court in Gerar. These similarities nevertheless do not preclude the appearance of a certain "comic brand" of Isaac's behavior in an already familiar situation. Isaac is caught "playing with Rebekah" (v. 8) outside of the king's window, which immediately exposes his deceit. Abimelech does not even get to take Rebekah into the harem, since the narrative pattern set up by Abraham is disrupted by this foolish act in an unexpected fashion.

The last time we see Isaac before he dies in chapter 35 is in chapter 27. Again, the *consensus scholarum* is that Isaac is fooled. "Despite his suspicions," writes Susan Schwartz, "the patriarch is ultimately fooled."¹⁵ Boase notes similarly, "Isaac is portrayed as weak, confused, and manipulated by those around him. ... His decisions are based on physical senses, not on thought and reflection."¹⁶ A similar judgment is pronounced by Kaminsky with a minute analysis of the process:

The final scene ... is the one in which Isaac is tricked into blessing Jacob instead of Esau. ... Isaac's tendency to favor Esau because he likes the food Esau prepares for him implies that Isaac has a propensity to overindulge in the baser pleasures and may also indicate that he is a bit dimwitted. ... Clearly Jacob's fooling of Isaac does not reveal Jacob's great acting ability, but Isaac's utter stupidity. One wonders how Isaac could have failed to notice, or to take more seriously, the clues that indicate this cannot be Esau. Jacob returned too quickly with game for his father, and when Jacob is questioned about his all too swift success, he attributes it not to his skill as a hunter but to God's help, a piety that does not seem to fit Esau. Then Isaac notices that his voice belongs to Jacob but chooses to ignore this fact because he mistakes the goat hair that Jacob has on his hands and neck for Esau's body hair. Finally, Isaac declares that the clothes Jacob is wearing smell of the field, even though they were stored in Rebekah's house. Quite often blind people compensate for their lack of sight by developing a keen sense of touch, smell, and hearing. Isaac's lack of sensory perception and his general gullibility indicate that Isaac is either a dullard or perhaps senile at this point in life.¹⁷

This questioning of Isaac's reliance on the wrong sense nicely encapsulates the mainstream reception of Isaac as a paradigmatic fool.¹⁸

¹⁵ Schwartz, "Brothers of Choice," 14.

¹⁶ Boase, "Life in the Shadows," 321.

¹⁷ Kaminsky, "Humor and the Theology of Hope," 371.

¹⁸ Jon D. Levenson, in his course on Genesis at Harvard School of Theology, used to ask this rhetorical question: "If you were blind, would you go by voice or by touch?" Kaminsky dedicates his article on Isaac to Levenson.

2. The Shift to Other Possible Readings of Isaac's Character

This characteristic of “a paradigmatic fool” encapsulates well this compact yet fairly full overview of the mainstream scholarly portrayal of Isaac. In what follows, we perceive a whole realm of renderings apart from the plane of comicality, which opens up certain possibilities that begin to point at the depth of Isaac's character. Curiously, the pendulum sometimes swings the other direction in assessments of the final scene in Isaac's life, and his schlemiel aspect vanishes, turning indeed into the very opposite. Adrien Bledstein, for instance, suggests that Isaac is the “arch trickster,” a self-defense mechanism of the weak and unprotected.¹⁹ In between this rather extreme contrast between Isaac as either trickster or fool, there is room for a wide array of readings. Nathaniel Hoover, for instance, provides a thorough analysis of Isaac's senses and comes out with different possibilities or degrees of Isaac's awareness with regard to the son standing before him. “How someone reads Isaac's knowledge level will have an effect on how she judges his character,” observes Hoover.²⁰ Evaluating these options, he suggests that “Isaac may view the situation as a test of Jacob's character. How well does he perform under pressure?”²¹ Here, Hoover provides an interpretation of Isaac as “the tester,” a less radical assessment than “the arch trickster.”²² Barry O'Neill, in contrast, does not grant Isaac the same level of awareness, yet he gives him full credit for the attempt at verifying the son:

It is a “deception” but not a “trick” in our terms, because Isaac tried to verify whom he was facing. He challenged Jacob for coming back from the hunt so soon and proceeded to apply every sense he had left to make sure he was blessing the right son. He questioned Jacob's voice and tasted the meal, but Rebecca had seen to that. He felt Jacob to find if he was hairy and then smelled him. In the end he was deceived, but he was not tricked. He could feel angry, but not foolish.²³

Despite O'Neill's caution, Hoover is not alone in his assessment of Isaac as manipulative. David Zucker, for instance, has called Jacob “the deceiver deceived,”

¹⁹ Isaac as the arch-trickster interpretation is based on the assumption that the storyteller is a female, and within this framework, “the woman's character is valued, and a man in authority is vulnerable and devious,” which makes the man resort to trickery. Bledstein, “Binder, Trickster, Heel, and Hairy-Man,” 290.

²⁰ Hoover, “Who are You?” 36. Hoover provides a “chart of how the different senses are deceived in this episode”: sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell (*ibidem*, 34).

²¹ Hoover, “Who are You?” 37.

²² Interestingly, it seems that while assessing the probable degree of Isaac's awareness, Hoover (“Who are You?” 17) still doesn't quite cease evaluating the patriarch as a dim-witted, primitive man, ascribing to him covert stupidity claims: “If Isaac is perceived as a man of appetite, he is then very much like Esau.”

²³ O'Neill, “A Formal System,” 15.

arguing that “Jacob’s betrayal plan notwithstanding, Isaac knows that it is his younger son before him. Isaac, in repeated statements, challenges Jacob’s actions.”²⁴

3. The Revealing of Tragic Overtones

This spectrum of verdicts on Isaac in general and on chapter 27 in particular gradually leads us from the fool zone to the trickster territory. Yet even this shift leaves out an important aspect of the patriarchal portrait. Zooming in on Isaac in chapter 27, we may see him emerging less comic, less dumb, and, at the same time, less of a tester/teaser/trickster figure than he allegedly is in modern reception. As David H. Aaron notes in *Genesis Ideology*, Isaac questions who is standing before him no less than *five* times in verses 18, 20, 21, 24, and 26!

18: “Yes, my son,” he answered. “Who is it?”

20: Isaac asked his son, “How did you find it so quickly, my son?”

21: Then Isaac said to Jacob, “Come near so I can touch you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not.”

24: “Are you really my son Esau?” he asked.

26: Then his father Isaac said to him, “Come here, my son, and kiss me.”

This rhetorical device makes altogether clear that the entire story revolves around Jacob’s *inability to trick his father*.²⁵ The author disperses these hints subtly, and given Isaac’s response to Esau later in verse 35—“But he said, ‘Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing’”—one might believe what has traditionally been believed: that Isaac is a victim rather than a co-conspirator. The peak of Isaac’s alleged uncertainty as to who stands in front of him is expressed in that famous verse 23: “The voice is the voice of Jacob, the hands are the hands of Esau.” It is quite unlikely that Esau would appear before his father using Jacob’s voice—and how could the voice be feigned anyway, Aaron asks.²⁶ Nor is the meal of domestic sheep a credible proxy for goat’s meat. The pressing subtlety of these verses then does

²⁴ Zucker, “The Deceiver Deceived,” 48.

²⁵ See the following: Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 208; Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 440. Wenham argues that the questioning serves the purpose of suspense building, whereas Westermann treats the second inquiry in verse 24 after verse 21 as the first part of the blessing rite, when identification is confirmed. Both observations are valid and non-alternative, but pertain to the narrative structure, rather than the character’s portrait.

²⁶ Aaron, *Genesis Ideology*, 58. Aaron might be right from “scientific,” medical, and psychological points of view. But is it absolutely not possible to feign the voice, especially the voice of the sibling? In addition: is it impossible to be deceived by the likeness of voices, whether it’s psychology or acoustics? Yet there is a danger in raising an anachronistic question in translating the literary reality into the scientific realm.

not convey confusion on Isaac's part; rather, they suggest the character's perception of the situation: Isaac is well aware of who is before him!

The ultimate question then becomes the following: why does he act as a co-conspirator with Rebekah and Jacob? The key phrase is a nuance contained in verse 27 at the last test of a kiss, after the fifth questioning: "Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field that *the Lord has blessed*." The key phrase here is the last one: "that the Lord has blessed." Aaron concludes, "As Isaac sees it, Yahweh is sending Jacob."²⁷ This might also be an allusion to the previous chapter, verse 12: "Isaac sowed seed in that land, and in the same year reaped a hundredfold. The Lord blessed him." In this way, Jacob is his successor in blessing. The main point, however, is this irreversible understanding that the real author of the scheme is not Rebekah or Jacob, but Yahweh himself.

This is where the tragic overtones of Isaac as a character come in. Yet the beautiful elusiveness of this monologue is all too easy to miss. As a result, the interpreter continues to be under the impression of Isaac's dim-wittedness, or alternately assigns manipulative, trickster motives to the patriarch. Retorting the standard "Isaac fooled" stance, David Aaron points out that the confusion is signaled to the reader by the intervention of the redactor, who placed verse 23 between verses 22 and 24.²⁸ Verse 22 reads, "So Jacob went up to his father Isaac, who felt him and said, 'The voice is Jacob's voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.'" Instead of proceeding to the logical conclusion of this statement in verse 24, "Are you really my son Esau?," the text adds the following comment in verse 23: "He did not recognize him because his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; and so he blessed him." This insertion of verse 23 reframes the story so that the reader can be certain that Isaac was *not* part of the conspiracy in the undermining of Esau's birthright. Now, with the help of the redactor, the story has one main purpose: to move Jacob back to Paddan-aram because of Esau's desire for vengeance, as well as Rebekah's concern to find a Jewish wife for Jacob, and this concern frames chapter 27 by verse 34 of the previous chapter and verse 46 of the current one—the verses about the fear of Hittite wives that are a source of bitterness to Rebekah.²⁹ This insertion of verse 23, according to Aaron, is a moment of ideology in this subtle psychological portraiture, a reframing of the story that used to be different before the intervention.

This is a watershed moment. We have come to one of the major pointers accountable for this conventional viewing of the protagonist as a fool. The intervening hand of the redactor is perhaps one of the clues to our understanding of Isaac as stupid, incompetent, and gullible. The redactor and the modern scholars are, as it were,

The deception should rather be viewed as a literary and theological trope, in line with John Anderson's argument in *Jacob and the Divine Trickster*.

²⁷ Aaron, *Genesis Ideology*, 58.

²⁸ Aaron, *Genesis Ideology*, 59.

²⁹ Aaron, *Genesis Ideology*, 59.

on the same page, in their view on the character of Isaac. Yet clearly the phrase about the voice and hands is not an admission of confusion, but, on the contrary, a statement regarding Isaac's certainty. Isaac was *not* tricked in chapter 27, nor was he the arch trickster or the tester, as the one who out of weakness or alleged sense of power attempts (in futility) to gain control. The awareness, the ritual suspenseful probing, and the recognition of the divine will followed by submission yields depth, perspicacity, and a nobly sad nature to the portrait of the patriarch.

4. An Excursus to the Diachronic Reading

We have finally arrived at the intersection of the synchronic and diachronic analyses of the Isaac tradition in Genesis. A synchronic reading of Isaac's acumen can be corroborated by evidence from diachronic reading. Transmission/historical issues, in addition to the contemporary interpretations informed by the theory of comedy, are likely involved with the overall slant in the presentation of Isaac as a schlemiel and/or trickster. Boase delves into the most fertile ground for tracing redactional history, in which the transferal and development of traditions could be found in the duplicate stories, the variations on a theme that so abound in the Hebrew Bible.

A brief overview of two significant comparative Isaac/Abraham moments will be helpful for fine-tuning the habitually perceived Isaac figure. The redaction history of the Isaac material in chapter 26 yielded a number of points suggesting the dependence of the Abraham material on the Isaac narrative (such as evidence from the Abimelech covenant material and the wells material from chapters 21 and 26). As Dennis J. McCarthy and Claus Westermann concur, the Isaac episode in Gerar portrays Isaac as, if anything, a more powerful figure than Abraham.³⁰ Important traces of this evidence are such details as the extra adviser who comes with Abimelech's deputation: "Meanwhile, Abimelech had come to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his personal adviser and Phicol the commander of his forces" (v. 26). This verse suggests a need for increased political weight in dealing with Isaac. No royal retinue, on the other hand, is reported in the Abraham-Abimelech episode. Isaac confronts Abimelech's approach, pointing to his eviction from Gerar, a deed possible only presuming Isaac's powerful status: "Isaac asked them, 'Why have you come to me, since you were hostile to me and sent me away?'" (v. 27). Abraham, on the other hand, does not question Abimelech's approach. Another vestige of Isaac's "primordial" significance is the reciprocity of the oath proposed by Abimelech and sworn by both parties: "The men swore an oath to each other" (v. 31). In Abraham's case, on the other

³⁰ See the discussion of the covenant in McCarthy, "Three Covenants in Genesis," 179–189; see also Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*.

hand, at the treaty of Beersheba Abraham alone swears to Abimelech: “Abraham said: ‘I swear it’” (Gen 21:24).

Conclusion

A more comprehensive list of features indicating a stronger Isaac figure based on looking into the earlier tradition within the palimpsest of the wife-sister stories is beyond the scope of this paper. The point in enlisting these examples is to demonstrate a complex transmission history that at the very least suggests that originally there were traditions associated with Abraham and traditions associated with Isaac. At one time, Isaac seems to have been less subordinate than the image we have of him now, neither a fool nor a trickster. He most certainly had traditions associated with him alone; his actions were not just a replica of Abraham’s. As Boase concludes, there is both gain and loss for Isaac from the subsequent merging of the traditions: on the one hand, he obviously ends up being overshadowed by Abraham; and yet, the overshadowing is done by a figure as great as Abraham, and the reflected light of the first patriarch imparts the greatness onto his son.³¹ The fact that Isaac, as it were, lives in the shadows in terms of his literary characterization is to some extent not his own “fault,” but a result of the redactional development of the tradition.

These are some of the trajectories of thought and research that help account both for the generally accepted transmission of Isaac’s character and for the emergence of what I propose to see as a different Isaac coming through in such a poignant unrelenting way in Genesis 27. The close-up of Isaac in chapter 27 draws the portrait of an astute, perceptive, and woeful figure—a clandestine portrayal that is easy to miss. But this zoomed-in treatment of Isaac sheds a different light on this figure than what has been generally done by scholarly consensus. May this focused perspective suggest a different synchronic vision of Isaac in the enigmatic figure of the second patriarch: materializing out of the habitual role of dumb-witted, ridiculous schlemiel there emerges a persona that is discerning, alert, and large-scale, as only a tragic hero could be.

³¹ Boase, “Life in the Shadows,” 334.

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