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## Zion Gained and Lost: Fourth Nephi as the Quintessential Model

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**Abstract:** Even more significant than simply telling us that the Lord wants to establish Zion in the last days, the Book of Mormon also provides us in 4 Nephi with an impressive model which shows how Zion functions, and what benefits derive from living a Zion-like existence. As one examines the scriptural accounts which trace the history of efforts to establish Zion, none are as poignant and succinct, yet so detailed, as that in 4 Nephi. All of the components and principles of a Zion society described in various other passages of the standard works are discernible together in 4 Nephi.



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Quintessential Model*

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Andrew C. Skinner

**T**he Book of Mormon makes it abundantly clear that God cares about establishing Zion in the last days. Through an angel, the Lord said to Nephi:

And blessed are they who shall seek to bring forth my Zion at that day, for they shall have the gift and the power of the Holy Ghost; and if they endure unto the end they shall be lifted up at the last day, and shall be saved in the everlasting kingdom of the Lamb; and whoso shall publish peace, yea, tidings of great joy, how beautiful upon the mountains shall they be. (1 Nephi 13:37)

Perhaps even more significant than simply telling us that the Lord wants to establish Zion in the last days, the Book of Mormon also provides us in 4 Nephi with an impressive model which shows *how* Zion functions, and what benefits derive from living a Zion-like existence. As one examines the scriptural accounts which trace the history of efforts to establish Zion, none are as poignant and succinct, yet so detailed, as that in 4 Nephi. All of the components and principles of a Zion society described in various other passages of the standard works are discernible together in 4 Nephi.

### Principles of Zion

Though the concept of Zion is multifaceted, God has decreed that the essential ingredients of a Zion society are the premier principles of purity, unity, and equality. In 1833 God said to Joseph Smith

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at Kirtland, “Let Zion rejoice, for this is Zion—THE PURE IN HEART; therefore, let Zion rejoice, while all the wicked shall mourn” (D&C 97:21).

In 1834 the Lord gave more specific instruction about the other characteristics which must be found among the pure in heart in order for a Zion society to exist as a people in a place. In essence, these characteristics are all extensions of the godly attribute of unity.

But behold, [my people] have not learned to be obedient to the things which I required at their hands, but are full of all manner of evil, and do not impart of their substance, as becometh saints, to the poor and afflicted among them; And are not *united* according to the union required by the law of the celestial kingdom; And Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom; otherwise I cannot receive her unto myself. (D&C 105:3–5; emphasis added)

From this passage four things are apparent. One, a Zion society requires economic unity and material equality among its citizens. Elsewhere the Lord said, “For if ye are not equal in earthly things ye cannot be equal in obtaining heavenly things” (D&C 78:6). Two, unity is the foundational principle of celestial law which governs all aspects of a Zion society. The Lord told the Saints on another occasion that if they were not unified, if they were not one in purpose and desire just as he himself is one with his Father, then they (the Saints) were not his (D&C 38:27). Three, the concept of earthly Zion rests on the premise that there is a celestial prototype—“a heavenly society comprised of exalted beings who [live] in the presence of God” (Andrus 26). Zion on earth is to be patterned after that celestial society which thrives in God’s literal presence. The fourth notion we derive from this passage follows naturally: the ultimate destiny of a Zion society is to be taken into the presence of the Lord. This seems to be the design and purpose of the real maker and governor of every Zion community, who is God! “And Zion cannot be built up unless it is by the principles of the law of the celestial kingdom; otherwise I cannot receive her unto myself” (D&C 105:5).

This immediately recalls an ancient group of people who became Saints by molding their lives to conform with the principles of Zion and were taken unto the Lord, or translated. We know them as the inhabitants of the city of Enoch, and their achievement is recounted to us in Moses 7:18–21:

And the Lord called his people Zion, because they were of one heart and one mind, and dwelt in righteousness; and there was no poor among them. And Enoch continued his preaching in righteousness unto the people of God. And it came to pass in his days, that he built a city that was called the City of Holiness, even Zion. And it came to pass that Enoch talked with the Lord; and he said unto the Lord: Surely Zion shall dwell in safety forever. But the Lord said unto Enoch: Zion have I blessed, but the residue of the people have I cursed. And it came to pass that the Lord showed unto Enoch all the inhabitants of the earth; and he beheld, and lo, Zion, in process of time, was taken up into heaven. And the Lord said unto Enoch: Behold mine abode forever.

These verses also teach profound truths that add significantly to our understanding of Zion. First, the same principles of purity of heart as well as economic, social, and spiritual unity, which are required by the Lord of the Saints of Zion in the present dispensation, operated anciently among the populace of Enoch's Zion. Second, there is a direct correlation between any society's purity and unity, and God's association with that society. Third, attempts to establish Zion did not begin in Joseph Smith's day, the dispensation of the fulness of times. God has cared about the establishment of Zion throughout the history of our world.

### Other Zion Societies

Significant evidence indicates that efforts were put forth to build Zion societies in every gospel dispensation where the fulness of the priesthood operated. President Marion G. Romney taught that "whenever the Lord has had a people who accept and live the gospel, He has established the united order" (92).

Though Enoch's people constitute the best-known example of a Zion society, there were others in ancient times which are just as impressive, and perhaps even more dramatic. Alma teaches that Melchizedek, to whom Abraham submitted himself and paid tithes, was king over the land of Salem (Alma 13:15, 17). Amazingly, all his people were once great sinners being "strong in iniquity and abomination . . . [and] full of all manner of wickedness" (v 17). But because of the efforts of Melchizedek, who preached repentance unto them, they humbled themselves, participated in Melchizedek Priesthood ordinances and received a remission of their sins "that they might enter into the rest of the Lord" (Alma 13:16).

Through the Prophet Joseph Smith we know that the “rest of the Lord” is nothing less than “the fulness of his glory” (D&C 84:24). And also through him we know that Melchizedek succeeded in establishing a Zion society and his people in obtaining heaven while in mortality; they were translated and taken from the earth, as were all people in ancient times who demonstrated supreme faith. From Joseph Smith’s inspired translation of Genesis we read:

Now Melchizedek was a man of faith, who wrought righteousness . . .

And thus, having been approved of God, he was ordained an high priest after the order of the covenant which God made with Enoch. . . .

For God having sworn unto Enoch and unto his seed with an oath by himself; that every one being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith, to break mountains, to divide the seas . . .

To put at defiance the armies of nations, to divide the earth, to break every band, to stand in the presence of God . . . and this by the will of the Son of God which was from before the foundation of the world.

And men having this faith, coming up unto this order of God, were translated and taken up into heaven.

And now, Melchizedek was a priest of this order; therefore he obtained peace in Salem, and was called the Prince of Peace.

And his people wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven, and sought for the city of Enoch which God had before taken, having reserved it unto the latter days, or the end of the world. (JST Gen 14:26–27, 30–34)

A careful reading of this passage in conjunction with Alma 13 reveals that the kind of faith which allowed the ancient Saints to arrive at a point whereby they could be translated was a faith rooted in the ordinances of the Melchizedek Priesthood which leads to Jesus Christ. Note again the wording of the Joseph Smith Translation: “everyone being ordained after this order and calling should have faith, to . . . stand in the presence of God . . . and this by the will of the Son of God” (JST Gen 14:30). In this same vein, remember what Alma says about the ordinances practiced among the people of Melchizedek’s day:

Now these ordinances were given after this manner, that thereby the people might look forward on the Son of God, it being a type of his order, or it being his order, and this that they might look forward to him for a remission of their sins, that they might enter into the rest of the Lord. (Alma 13:16)

Thus, another essential component of a Zion society is the operation of the Melchizedek Priesthood.

It seems significant that we possess no record of the establishment of a Zion society among the Israelites living under the Aaronic priesthood-based Mosaic law from the time of Moses down to Jesus Christ. But when the post-resurrection Church became fully functioning in the days of the Apostles, a clear and repeated picture of the social and economic structure of the Church was revealed and it was based on the unmistakable principles of the law of the celestial kingdom or, in other words, a Zion society. In the fourth chapter of Acts, Luke describes the situation this way:

And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul: neither said any of them that ought of the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things in common. And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, And laid them down at the apostles feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need. (vv 32–35)

There is a similarity between this account and the one found in the book of Moses which explicitly describes the establishment of Enoch's Zion. But the Zion community described in Acts was short-lived due to apostasy, as well as basic selfishness and dishonesty. The actions of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11) were most likely included in Luke's record immediately following his description of the early church's Zion-like organization for two reasons: first, to demonstrate the kind of endemic dishonesty which destroyed that Zion society, and, second, to show the special penalty attached to the willful breaking of the covenant of consecration or the order of Zion.

Ananias and Sapphira held back part of that which they had covenanted to consecrate to God. And when they lied about it, they were struck dead. Modern revelation sheds light on this severe punishment for breaking the law of consecration. Speaking of the establishment of Zion in Joseph Smith's day, the Lord said:

For Zion must increase in beauty, and in holiness. . . .

Therefore, I give unto you this commandment, that ye bind yourselves by this covenant, and it shall be done according to the laws of the Lord. . . .

And you are to be equal, or in other words, you are to have equal claims on the properties, . . . every man according to his wants and his needs, inasmuch as his wants are just—

And all this for the benefit of the church of the living God, that every man may improve upon his talent, that every man may gain other talents, yea, even an hundred fold, to be cast into the Lord's storehouse, to become the common property of the whole church. . . .

And the soul that sins against this covenant, and hardeneth his heart against it, shall be dealt with according to the laws of my church, and shall be delivered over to the buffetings of Satan until the day of redemption. (D&C 82:14–21)

### Imitations of Zion

History shows that selfishness, greed, pride, and dishonesty have always been great obstacles in the establishment of any utopian society. However, the existence of these features of our fallen world have also been great motivators among idealists, as well as the oppressed, to establish a better way of life, governed by higher ideals. The “pure in heart” seek not for utopia but for a society founded on celestial principles under the watchful care of God.

Even some groups who did not possess the Melchizedek Priesthood recognized the waywardness of Jerusalem-centered Judaism during the Intertestamental Period. These groups attempted to set up reformed and unified communities, and to enact and live by those same kinds of principles which were established in true Zion societies as revealed in the scriptures.

The Essenes of Qumran were such a sect. They apparently withdrew from what they perceived to be a thoroughly corrupt Judaism of their day and set up a covenant community by the Dead Sea. Their preserved library is known to us as the Dead Sea Scrolls. From the document known variously as the “Manual of Discipline,” the “Community Rule,” or the “Serek Scroll” (which discusses regulations governing initiation into the sect as well as the community’s organization and discipline) we read of their communal ideals, again in language paralleling truths found in the book of Moses, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Acts of the Apostles.

Everyone who wishes to join the community must pledge himself to respect God and man; to live according to the communal rule; to seek God . . . to bring into a bond of mutual love all who have declared their willingness to carry out the statutes of God; to join the formal community of God; to walk blamelessly before Him in conformity with all that has been revealed. . . .

All who declare their willingness to serve God’s truth must bring all of their mind, all of their strength, and all of their wealth into the community

of God, so that their minds may be purified by the truth of His precepts, their strength controlled by His perfect ways, and their wealth disposed in accordance with His just design. (Gaster 44)

Ultimately the Qumran community was destroyed, but archaeological evidence indicates that it was successful for two centuries.

## 4 Nephi

Of all the descriptions of Zion found in holy writ, none is as singularly instructive as the one presented in 4 Nephi. It not only teaches us about the social and religious characteristics of Zion in a more detailed way than other descriptions, but also illuminates in unmistakable terms the root causes of the demise of a Zion society.

The Zion society of 4 Nephi was established on the American continent sometime between AD 34 and 36. Discipleship in Christ was *the* foundation of this Zion. All social progress and societal goodness centered in Jesus Christ, whose visit to this continent after his resurrection established an age of unadulterated righteousness lasting about 165 years. Every individual was wholly converted to the Savior—to his ideas and exemplary behavior (4 Nephi 1:2). After repenting, every person was prepared to participate in the life-giving and renewing ordinances available through the Melchizedek Priesthood, especially the Gift of the Holy Ghost (v 1).

A natural by-product of the constant influence and power of the Holy Ghost was the desire of all the people to deal justly and fairly with each other. Therefore, all the people had all things in common and all their acts conformed to the pattern of the Savior's life. In sum, complete conversion to the Lord eliminated contention, produced unselfish self-regulation, and resulted in economic and political equality and freedom.

The scriptural phrase “had all things in common” is undoubtedly used to characterize those who lived the law of consecration (see Acts 4:32; 2:44; 3 Nephi 26:19; 4 Nephi 1:3). As Joseph Smith taught, such a system was *not* a type of Christian communism (*History of the Church* 6:37–38; hereafter *HC*). Every covenant member of this order (all things in common) held some private property and had access to consecrated surpluses according to justified “wants” and “needs” (D&C 82:17–18).



The civil structure described in 4 Nephi displayed a total absence of destructive or divisive elements, including poverty, selfishness, and social Darwinism (survival of the fittest), which resulted in a classlessness that eliminated crime and allowed society's resources to be applied to and focused on urban renewal.

And the Lord did prosper them exceedingly in the land; yea, insomuch that they did build cities again where there had been cities burned. Yea, even that great city Zarahemla did they cause to be built again. . . . And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God. There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God. (4 Nephi 1:7–8, 16–17)

Only true conversion to Christ and strict adherence to his example and teachings can bring significant and lasting renewal and reconstruction. Only true conversion to Christ can do more than offer mere stop-gap measures to solve problems. President Ezra Taft Benson has said:

The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature. ("Born of God" 6)

Certainly, the pattern of events described in 4 Nephi bears this out.

One of the attendant developments of socio-economic reform, civic rejuvenation, and urban renewal is the increased health, strength, and vigor of a population. The people of Nephi enjoyed this blessing: "And now, behold, it came to pass that the people of Nephi did wax strong, and did multiply exceedingly fast, and became an exceedingly fair and delightsome people" (4 Nephi 1:10).

In the Christ-centered Zion society of 4 Nephi, the people witnessed a rich and astounding outpouring of miracles, including those which symbolized the mortal Messiah's absolute power over life and death—raising the dead. But, again, indicative of the Christ-centered nature of this religious society, we are told that no miracles were done "save it were in the name of Jesus" (4 Nephi 1:5).

A striking feature of Mormon's description of Zion in 4 Nephi is his emphasis on the total lack of contention in the land, which he mentions in verses 2, 13, 15, and 18. This surely must be due to the complete unity of a civilization in which there were neither Nephites, Lamanites, nor any other -ites, but all were one in Christ (4 Nephi 1:17) because the love of God dwelt in their hearts (v 15). And, like other Zion societies of bygone eras, the people were heirs to the kingdom of God (v 17).

The Zion society described in 4 Nephi was a literal fulfillment of the much repeated prophetic teaching throughout the Book of Mormon that if people would keep God's commandments they would prosper in the land. As Mormon says of the people living during the post-resurrection era of 4 Nephi, "For the Lord did bless them in all their doings" (v 18).

### Apostasy

The power and influence of the Savior's literal, physical presence among the Nephites was so strong that they lived the principles of Zion well into the second generation after Christ's visit. But sometime before AD 194 (4 Nephi 1:21) social and religious divisions reappeared in the society and drew away part of the people. Even though it was only a small percentage of the population, its seriousness should not be underestimated; Mormon is clear as to its cause: "The people . . . had *revolted* from the Church and taken upon them the name of Lamanites; therefore there began to be Lamanites again in the land" (4 Nephi 1:20; emphasis added).

This is the classic definition of apostasy from the original Greek term *apostasia*, literally "to stand apart from," "to rebel," or "to revolt." This is the kind of apostasy witnessed in the New Testament many years after the Savior visited his disciples of the early Church in the *Old World* after his resurrection.

The Apostle Paul's Old World prophecy of the Great Apostasy beginning in the middle of the first century AD surely applies to the people of 4 Nephi as Mormon saw them. Paul said: "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

The motives of these predicted apostates may be associated with the aims and goals of practicing of priestcraft as described in 2 Nephi 26:29: “Priestcrafts are that men preach and set themselves up for a light unto the world, that they may get gain and praise of the world; *but they seek not the welfare of Zion*” (emphasis added). As it was in the Old World so it went in the New World. Priestcraft did reappear:

Nevertheless, the people did harden their hearts, for they were led by many priests and false prophets to build up many churches, and to do all manner of iniquity. And they did smite upon the people of Jesus; but the people of Jesus did not smite again. And thus they did dwindle in unbelief and wickedness, from year to year, even until two hundred and thirty years had passed away. (4 Nephi 1:34)

Mormon explicitly links apostasy and priestcraft with two other evils profoundly detrimental to the maintenance of a Zion society. These are pride and social stratification, which began to appear in AD 201—less than a decade after the initial cracks in the solidarity of the society were first noted by Mormon. The prosperity of the people of Nephi, owing to their faith in Christ, had produced great wealth among the populace. Unfortunately, this, in turn, led to pride and materialism as the people forgot the source of their strength. The result was that “from that time forth they did have their goods and their substance no more in common among them” (4 Nephi 1:25).

Here the insidious nature of pride is laid bare, and its destructive effects on Zion seen in an unmistakable way. Pride destroys unity and promotes selfishness. As President Benson quoting C. S. Lewis said, “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man” (“Cleansing the Inner Vessel” 7). Pride seeks to create divisions among people purely for the sake of self-interest, so that some may place themselves above others and exploit them. President Benson also stated, “It was essentially the sin of pride that kept us from establishing Zion in the days of the Prophet Joseph Smith. It was the same sin of pride that brought consecration to an end among the Nephites. Pride is the great stumbling block to Zion” (“Beware of Pride” 7). Pride was the cause of social stratification among the people of 4 Nephi. The book of Helaman describes how it came about, which is the same process seen in an earlier period of Nephite history.

For behold, the Lord had blessed them so long with the riches of the world that they had not been stirred up to anger, to wars, nor to bloodshed; therefore they began to set their hearts upon their riches; yea, they began to seek to get gain that they might be lifted up one above another. (Hel 6:17)

Mormon is also quick to implicate social stratification as a goal of priestcraft as well as a tool of the devil: “And they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves *to get gain*, and began to deny the true church of Christ” (4 Nephi 1:26; emphasis added).

Greater and greater dissent from the true church resulted in sacred things (especially the ordinances of salvation) being trifled with (4 Nephi 1:27). By AD 210 this provided Satan with the chance to get greater hold on the hearts of the people (v 28). The true followers of Christ suffered increasing persecution (vv 29–33) because those in open rebellion against God “were taught to hate the children of God” (v 39). The downward slide of this civilization began to pick up momentum. The division of society into classes resulted in irreparable tears in the social fabric. In the 231st year groupings of people began to appear, what Mormon calls the “great division among the people” (v 35). These divisions further fragmented society and accentuated the loss of the celestial condition of unity.

The ultimate result of the rebellion which Satan instigated among the people who once lived in a pure and idyllic society was the formation of those secret combinations which Mormon had noted earlier (Hel 2:13) would prove to be the overthrow and entire destruction of the people of Nephi: “And it came to pass that the wicked part of the people began again to build up the secret oaths and combinations of Gadianton” (4 Nephi 1:42).

Without question Satan was at the very heart of the secret combinations which destroyed once and for all, without hope of recovery, the Zion society of the Nephites. He alone inspires the hearts of wicked men to secretly combine against righteousness (Hel 6:26). And he concocts and administers the oaths and covenants of his kingdom. However, Satan could not have made any inroads without the initial overtures of the people themselves. Joseph Smith taught that “the moment we *revolt* at anything which comes from God, the devil takes power” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* 181; emphasis added; hereafter *TPJS*). The people of 4 Nephi, guilty of this revolt or rebellion, consciously rejected light and truth.

Considering their once blessed condition, and given the greatness of the many witnesses and miracles they enjoyed, the people of 4 Nephi could have remained righteous. Once they revolted, and Satan took power, the prophetic words of Mormon were fulfilled:

And thus we can plainly discern, that after a people have been once enlightened by the Spirit of God, and have had great knowledge of things pertaining to righteousness, and then have fallen away into sin and transgression, they become more hardened, and thus their state becomes worse than though they had never known these things. (Alma 24:30)

As the 300th year since Christ's birth passed away on the American continent, Satan's power grew in such strength and came to dominate the population so completely that "both the people of Nephi and the Lamanites [became] exceedingly wicked one like unto another" (4 Nephi 1:45).

Viewing the collapse of this Zion society from a panoramic perspective, as Mormon was able to do, he shows us that the decline was progressive. It happened a step at a time, with each successive step further destroying the purity, unity, and equality of the people. Over a 100 year period, beginning gradually as a small rebellion against truth and light around AD 194, the decline of the people culminated in total wickedness in AD 300. The capstone of this process was the reappearance of secret combinations administered by Satan himself. The panoramic perspective of the destruction of Zion in America validates and demonstrates the great truth declared by the prophet Nephi at the beginning of the Book of Mormon:

For behold, at that day shall he rage in the hearts of the children of men, and stir them up to anger against that which is good. And others will he pacify, and lull them away into carnal security, that they will say: All is well in Zion; yea, Zion prospereth, all is well—and thus the devil cheateth their souls, and leadeth them away carefully down to hell. (2 Nephi 28:20–21)

## Conclusion

The description of Zion in 4 Nephi is the greatest and most detailed model of those conditions which must exist in order for Zion to be established. Sadly, it is also the quintessential model which portrays those events that bring about the dissolution of a Zion society. But in this there is a great blessing because, as the first Nephi said

long ago, if we liken all scriptures unto ourselves and our circumstances it will be for our profit and learning (1 Nephi 19:23).

In these last days, God cares about and knows the benefits derived from the establishment of Zion. The tenth article of faith reaffirms our belief that Zion will again be built on the American continent. The Prophet Joseph Smith stated that “we ought to have the building up of Zion as our greatest object” (*TPJS* 160). In 1829, before the Church was organized, the Lord gave identical counsel to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, Hyrum Smith, Joseph Knight, and David Whitmer: “Keep my commandments, and seek to bring forth and establish the cause of Zion” (D&C 6:6; 11:6; 12:6; 14:6).

The scriptures teach that Zion can be built only by following the principles described in 4 Nephi, and by making conscious, correct choices every day. President Spencer W. Kimball said that “creating Zion commences in the heart of each person” (4). He further noted:

Zion can be built up only among those who are the pure in heart—not a people torn by covetousness or greed, but a pure and selfless people, not a people who are pure in appearance, rather a people who are pure in heart. Zion is to be in the world and not of the world, not dulled by a sense of carnal security, nor paralyzed by materialism. . . . We must sacrifice whatever is required by the Lord. We begin by offering a “broken heart and a contrite spirit.” We follow this by giving our best effort in our assigned fields of labor and in our callings. We learn our duty and execute it fully. Finally we consecrate our time, talents, and means as called upon by our file leaders and as prompted by the whisperings of the Spirit. (4–5)

I believe that God has given us 4 Nephi as a blueprint from which to learn how to be a Zion people. If we study its messages carefully, we can avoid the same tragic mistakes its people made.

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