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## Now If This Is Boasting, Even So Will I Boast!

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Loren Blake Spendlove

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# NOW IF THIS IS BOASTING, EVEN SO WILL I BOAST!

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Loren Blake Spendlove

**Abstract:** *When the sons of Mosiah were returning from their preaching among the Lamanites, Ammon was accused by his brother Aaron of boasting. This article demonstrates how Ammon’s response to this charge employed wordplay involving the Hebrew roots ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) and ש-מ-ח (s-m-ch). Identifying and understanding Ammon’s use of wordplay helps us to appreciate the complexity and conceptual richness of his message.*

Following their missionary experiences in “the land of Nephi” (Mosiah 28:5)<sup>1</sup> the sons of Mosiah and their companions “did rejoice exceedingly, for the success which they had had among the Lamanites” (Alma 25:17). In fact, Ammon expressed so much elation in their success that his brother Aaron was afraid he had been carried away “unto boasting” (Alma 26:10). In Ammon’s capably crafted response to his brother, we encounter wordplay that can only be *fully* ascertained if his words are translated into Hebrew.<sup>2</sup>

Among its many meanings, the Hebrew root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) — expressed by the verbal infinitives להלל (lehallel) and להתהלל (lehithallel) — can be subdivided into three principal definitions:<sup>3</sup>

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1. All Book of Mormon citations are from *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, edited by Royal Skousen (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

2. I assume Ammon’s original words carried Hebrew linguistic and grammatical characteristics.

3. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1907), 237, s.v. “הלל.”

1. to shine or “flash forth light,”<sup>4</sup> from which the name הילל (heylel), or Lucifer is believed to be derived (see Isaiah 14);<sup>5</sup>
2. to praise or be praised;
3. to boast or be boastful.

This root occurs nearly two hundred times in the Hebrew Bible, and in most of those instances it is rendered as *to praise* in the KJV and other English bible translations. Among these are the following passages:

For great is Jehovah, and **praised** (מהלל) greatly, And fearful He is above all gods. (1 Chronicles 16:25, Young’s Literal Translation<sup>6</sup>)

They are to stand every morning to thank and to **praise** (להלל) the LORD, and likewise at evening. (1 Chronicles 23:30, New American Standard Bible<sup>7</sup>)

Praise (הללו) ye Jehovah. **Praise** (הללו), O ye servants of Jehovah, Praise (הללו) the name of Jehovah. (Psalm 113:1, American Standard Version<sup>8</sup>)

Our holy and beautiful house, where our fathers **praised** (הללו) You, has been burned by fire; and all our precious things have become a ruin. (Isaiah 64:11, NASB)

The root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l), within its broad range of meaning, can also properly express the idea of *to boast*<sup>9</sup> in English. Amid the various

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4. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, NDL: Brill, 2000), 867. s.v. “הלל.”

5. Koehler and Baumgartner associate the name הילל (heylel, or Lucifer) with “the morning-star or crescent moon,” and as such related to the first meaning of ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) — *to shine*. Likewise, Brown, Driver, and Briggs also associate the noun הילל (heylel) with the first definition. However, it seems obvious that Isaiah also intended us to infer the second definition — *to be boastful*. Read in context, verses 13–14 of Isaiah 14 appear to support this idea. Isaiah tells us that Heylel’s (Lucifer in English) fall from heaven was accompanied by some serious self-boasting. Heylel boasted, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High” (New American Standard Bible).

6. Young’s Literal Translation (hereafter YLT) was published in 1862 by Robert Young.

7. Originally published in 1971, the New American Standard Bible (hereafter NASB) was most recently updated in 1995.

8. The American Standard Version (hereafter ASV) was first published in 1901.

9. Most often expressed with the reflexive verb להתהלל (lehithallel), which is the intensive hitpaal form of the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l).

English translations of the Hebrew Bible this translation occurs more than a dozen times. These passages include the following:<sup>10</sup>

My soul **shall make her boast in Jehovah** (ביהוה תתהלל), in Yahweh she [my soul] will boast): The meek shall hear thereof, and be glad. (Psalm 34:2, ASV)

**In God we have boasted** (באלהים הללנו) all day long, And we will give thanks to Your name forever. (Psalm 44:8, NASB)

You will winnow them and a wind will carry them away, a whirlwind will scatter them. But you will rejoice in the LORD; **you will boast in the Holy One of Israel** (ביהוה בקדוש ישראל) (תתהלל). (Isaiah 41:16, Christian Standard Bible<sup>11</sup>)

And if in a truthful, just and righteous way you swear, ‘As surely as the LORD lives,’ then the nations will invoke blessings by him **and in him they will boast** (ובו יתהללו). (Jeremiah 4:2, New International Version<sup>12</sup>)

It is also important to point out that in addition to *praise* and *boast*, the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) is also often translated as *to glory*<sup>13</sup> in various English translations. In each of these cases where it is rendered *to glory* it would be equally as plausible to translate the verb as *to boast*. For example, in the last two examples cited above (Isaiah 41:16 and Jeremiah 4:2) the King James Version (KJV) renders each as *glory* rather than *boast*. Additional examples of this optional translation include:

1 Chronicles 16:10:

**Glory ye** (התהללו hithalelu) in his holy name: let the heart of them rejoice that seek the LORD. (KJV)

**Boast yourselves** (התהללו hithalelu) in His holy name, rejoice doth the heart of those seeking Jehovah. (YLT)

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10. Not all English translations render these verses as “to boast.” Some use “to glory,” while others use “to praise.”

11. The Christian Standard Bible (CSB) is a very recent translation, with the first complete edition published in 2017.

12. The New International Version (NIV) was first published in 1978.

13. As with *to boast*, when derived from the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l), *to glory* is most often expressed with the reflexive verb להתהלל (lehithallel).

Jeremiah 9:23–24:

Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man **glory** (יִתְהַלֵּל yithallel) in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man **glory** (יִתְהַלֵּל yithallel) in his might, let not the rich man **glory** (יִתְהַלֵּל yithallel) in his riches: But **let him that glorieth glory** (יִתְהַלֵּל הַמְתַהַלֵּל yithallel hamithallel) in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD. (KJV)

This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise **boast** (יִתְהַלֵּל yithallel) of their wisdom or the strong **boast** (יִתְהַלֵּל yithallel) of their strength or the rich **boast** (יִתְהַלֵּל yithallel) of their riches, but let the **one who boasts boast** (יִתְהַלֵּל הַמְתַהַלֵּל yithallel hamithallel) about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD. (NIV)

As demonstrated above, different English translations of the Hebrew Bible render the verbs לִהְלֵל (lehallel) and לִהְתַּהַלֵּל (lehithallel) — both derived from the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) — as either *to praise*, *to boast*, or *to glory*. A key translation feature to point out is that in order for the verb to be rendered as *to boast* or *to glory*, the subject of the verb must *boast* or *glory in* someone or something (see above examples). The Hebrew equivalent of **in** is the preposition ב (the letter *bet*), which is always prefixed to the noun to which it is related. For example, the phrase “to boast/glory in Jehovah” would be expressed as “לִהְתַּהַלֵּל בַּיהוָה” (lehithallel bYahweh). One can boast/glory **in** the Lord as well as **in** one’s wisdom, strength, riches, etc.

It is equally important to point out that *to praise* does not carry this same grammatical requirement. Rather, what we often find in the Bible is that when לִהְלֵל (lehallel) is translated as *to praise*, the object of the verb (the Lord, for example) is often preceded by the preposition ל (the letter *lamed*). As with the Hebrew word for *in* (ב), ל is always prefixed to the object of the verb. The word ל can be translated as *to* or *for*, but when referring to the idea of *praise*, it is an unnecessary preposition in English grammar. So, “to praise Jehovah” would be expressed as “לִהְלֵל לַיהוָה” (lehallel lYahweh) in Hebrew, with the ל prefixed to יהוה (Yahweh), resulting in לַיהוָה (lYahweh).

With this introduction to biblical usage we can now examine Ammon's response to Aaron's charge of boasting. In the nine verses leading up to Aaron's rebuke, Ammon never used the words *boast* or *glory*, and we find the word *praise* used only once but as a noun rather than as a verb: "Blessed be the name of our God; let us **sing to his praise**,<sup>14</sup> yea, let us give thanks to his holy name, for he doth work righteousness forever" (Alma 26:8). However, following Aaron's accusation, Ammon used the words *praise*, *boast* and *glory* a total of twelve times in his response. These usages appear to be an intentional repetition of Aaron's original rebuke of *boasting* and need to be understood as related terms in Hebrew. Ammon's repeated use of *praise*, *boast*, and *glory* are meant to counter Aaron's implied accusation that Ammon was boasting *in himself*. On the contrary, Ammon's repetitive use of these terms helped clarify that his initial words were intended to be understood as praising, boasting in, and glorying in the Lord, rather than in himself.

Ammon's response to Aaron is bracketed at the beginning and the end of his discourse by two groupings of the English words *praise*, *boast*, and *glory*. I propose that all these translated English words are derived from the Hebrew root ל-ל-ה (h-l-l). The first grouping of these words is found at the beginning of his response in verses 11 through 16, and the second grouping is found at the end of his discourse in verses 35 and 36. These two groupings form an inclusio<sup>15</sup> similar to those often found in the Hebrew Bible and in Rabbinic literature. Broken into the two groupings, his words read:

**I do not boast in my own strength** or in my own wisdom;<sup>16</sup> but behold, my joy is full. Yea, my heart is brim with joy, and I will rejoice in my God. Yea, I know that I am nothing; as to my

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14. It is probable that Ammon did not use a word derived from the root ל-ל-ה (h-l-l) in this verse to express the idea of *praise*. Similar passages in the Hebrew Bible use the root ז-מ-ר (z-m-r) meaning *to sing*, and by implication *to sing praises* to express this concept. For example, in Psalm 9:2 we read: "I will be glad and rejoice in thee: **I will sing praise to thy name** [אזמרה שמך, *azamrah shimcha*], O thou most High." The phrase "I will sing praise" is simply expressed by the verb אזמרה (*azamrah*, I will sing), and the English word *praise* is merely inferred.

15. "An inclusio is a repeated phrase or whole line that stands at the beginning and end of a poetic unit. . . . The inclusio delimits a poetic unit, providing a strong sense of beginning and closure." Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings: A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 323.

16. The text in *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* for this verse differs from that published by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



strength, I am weak. Therefore **I will not boast of myself, but I will boast of my God**,<sup>17</sup> for in his strength I can do all things. Yea, behold, many mighty miracles we have wrought in this land, for which **we will praise his name forever**. Behold how many thousands of our brethren hath he loosed from the pains of hell! And they are brought to sing redeeming love — and this because of the power of his word which is in us. Therefore have we not great reason to rejoice? Yea, we have reason to praise him forever, for he is the Most High God and has loosed these our brethren from the chains of hell. Yea, they were encircled about with everlasting darkness and destruction; but behold, he hath brought them into his everlasting light, yea, into everlasting salvation. And they are encircled about with the matchless bounty of his love. Yea, and we have been instruments in his hands of doing this great and marvelous work. Therefore **let us glory**.<sup>18</sup> Yea, **we will glory in the Lord**; yea, we will rejoice, for our joy is full; yea, **we will praise our God forever**. Behold, **who can glory too much in the Lord**? Yea, who can say too much of his great power and of his mercy and of his long-suffering towards the children of men? Behold, I say unto you: I cannot say the smallest part which I feel. (Alma 26:11–16)

Now have we not reason to rejoice? Yea, I say unto you, there never were men that had so great reason to rejoice as we, since the world began; yea, and my joy is carried away, **even unto boasting** in my God; for he has all power, all wisdom, and all understanding; he comprehendeth all things, and he is a merciful Being, even unto salvation, to those who will repent and believe on his name. Now **if this is boasting, even so will I boast**; for this is my life and my light, my joy and my salvation, and my redemption from everlasting wo. Yea, blessed is the name of my God, who has been mindful of this people, who are a branch of the tree of Israel, and has been lost from its body in a strange land; yea, I say, blessed be

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17. Boasting of oneself or of God is equivalent to boasting in oneself or in God. Hebrew would express “to boast of God” or “to boast in God” as להתהלל באלוהים (lehithallel bElohim). Note that in the English translation of Ammon’s response he both boasts “of his God” (verse 12) and “in his God” (verse 35).

18. The use of *glory* as a verb is rare in the Book of Mormon. In addition to this verse, *glory* is only used as a verb in four other locations: 2 Nephi 33:6, Mosiah 23:11, Alma 29:9, and Alma 48:16.

the name of my God, who has been mindful of us, wanderers in a strange land. (Alma 26:35–36)

As can be easily observed from even a casual reading of Ammon’s response to Aaron, it was not Ammon’s intent to praise himself, or to boast or glory in his own abilities or success. Rather, Ammon’s praising, boasting and glorying were all directed toward God. And while Ammon’s repeated usage of the Hebrew root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) would have been difficult to miss in Hebrew, it is obscured in English because of the three separate English words used in translation: *praise*, *boast*, and *glory*.

Ammon’s repetitive use of the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) can be described by two different types of wordplay: *polyptoton* and *polysemy*. Polyptoton is a “repetition of the same root word but in a different form.”<sup>19</sup> More fully, it “is a repetition of the same word in the same sense, but not in the same form: from the same root, but in some other termination; as that of case, mood, tense, person, degree, number, gender, etc.”<sup>20</sup> Steen added that polyptoton “is one of the most frequently employed types of repetition in the Bible.”<sup>21</sup> Polysemy is “a linguistic term for a word’s capacity to carry two or more distinct meanings.”<sup>22</sup> As noted previously, the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) carries multiple distinct meanings, including to *shine*, to *praise*, and to *boast*. The following are two examples of polyptotonic wordplay in the Bible:

I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria and the plummet of the house of Ahab, and **I will wipe** (מחיתי) Jerusalem as **one wipes** (ימחה) a dish, **wiping** (מחה) it and turning it upside down. (2 Kings 21:13, NASB)

This example of polyptoton is readily observable in English — I will wipe, one wipes, and wiping — and in Hebrew (the infinitive is למחות, from the root מ-ח-ה (m-ch-h)) — מחיתי (machiti), ימחה (yimchah), מחה (machah). However, in the following example from Isaiah, the polyptotonic wordplay is completely hidden in English, because it would not make sense to translate the text the way it is written in Hebrew. Isaiah’s double usage of *hear* and *see* makes the statement more emphatic in Hebrew, expressed by the word *indeed* in English:

19. Julia Hans, *Go Figure!: An Introduction to Figures of Speech in the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: WestBow Press, 2018), 61.

20. E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1898), 267.

21. Janie Steen, *Verse and Virtuosity: The Adaptation of Latin Rhetoric in Old English Poetry* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 81.

22. Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 199.

And he said, Go, and tell this people, **Hear ye indeed** (שמעו שמעו, hear, you hear), but understand not; and **see ye indeed** (ראו ראו, see, you see), but perceive not. (Isaiah 6:9, KJV)

This type of polyptotonic wordplay is also a prominent feature of the Book of Mormon. For example, in 1 Nephi 8:2, Lehi told his family, “Behold, I have dreamed a dream, or in other words, I have seen a vision.” In this passage, Lehi twice utilized wordplay: חלמתי חלום (chalmati chalom — I dreamed a dream), and ראיתי מראה (raiti mareh — I saw a seeing).<sup>23</sup> These two examples of polyptotonic repetition are comprised of the following elements: חלמתי (chalamti, I dreamed) and חלום (chalom, a dream), both derived from the root ח-ל-ם (ch-l-m), and ראיתי (raiti, I saw) and מראה (mareh, seeing or vision), which originate from the root ר-א-ה (r-a-h).

In this final example of both polyptoton and polysemy, the wordplay is completely obscured in English while it is easily noticeable in Hebrew, just as we observed in Ammon’s response to Aaron:

If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying helpless under its load, you shall refrain **from leaving** (מעזב meazov) it to him, **you shall surely release** (עזב תעזב azov taazov) it with him (Exodus 23:5, NASB).

In this example the root ע-ז-ב (a-z-b) is used three times: מעזב (meazov, from leaving), and עזב תעזב (azov taazov, translated as *you shall surely release*, but literally meaning *releasing you shall release*). The wordplay in this verse is created with the infinitive לעזוב (laazov) which can signify both *to leave* and *to release*, and represents an ideal example of both polyptotonic and polysemic wordplay.

While some wordplay is expressed in simple polyptotonic or polysemic constructions, Ammon’s discourse contains a much more complex expression of these types of wordplay. Tables 1 and 2 below show my proposed Hebrew expressions derived from the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) for Ammon’s response to Aaron, divided according to the two groupings of usage at the beginning (Table 1) and the end (Table 2) of his response. While there is some repetition of form in the Hebrew, most word usages are unique expressions.

23. Examples of this same wordplay can be found in Genesis 37:5 where “Joseph dreamed a dream” (יחלם יוסף חלום yachalom yosef chalom), and in Ezekiel 8:4, which references “the vision that I saw” (ראיתי אשר מראה mareh asher raiti). It is also possible that Lehi used a different Hebrew root for “I have seen a vision” — ח-ז-ה (ch-z-h) — a root principally meaning *to see*. If he utilized this root, then the phrase “I have seen a vision” would have been rendered חזיתי חזון (chaziti chazon) in Hebrew (see Isaiah 1:1 as an example). Either way, the wordplay is preserved.

Table 1

Usage	Verse	English	Hebrew
1	11	I do not boast	(al-mithallel) אל-מתהלל <sup>24</sup>
2	12	I will not boast	אל-תתהלל (al-tithallel)
3	12	I will boast	תתהלל (tithallel)
4	12	we will praise	תהללו (tehallelu)
5	14	to praise	להלל (lehallel)
6	16	let us glory	(hithallelu) התהללו or (tithallelu) תתהללו
7	16	we will glory	תתהללו (tithallelu)
8	16	we will praise	תהללו (tehallelu)
9	16	who can glory	(yithallel) יתהלל <sup>25</sup>

Table 2

Usage	Verse	English	Hebrew
10	35	boasting	(tehilah) תהלה <sup>26</sup>
11	36	boasting	תהלה (tehilah)
12	36	I will boast	תתהלל (tithallel)

As can be observed in Tables 1 and 2, the Hebrew rendering of Ammon's words displays a significant amount of polyptotic and polysemic wordplay with significant variations in the verb conjugations and forms, mixed with the noun *boasting*, Aaron's original accusatory wording. In addition, Ammon's repetitious usage of the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l) allowed him to forcefully counter Aaron's charge of self-directed boasting, and to reorient the focus of his boasting toward his actual target — God.

In addition to Ammon's wordplay with the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l), it is also apparent that Ammon employed similar polyptotic wordplay with the noun *joy* (שמחה, simchah) and the verb *rejoice* (לשמח, lismoach) — both derived from the root ש-מ-ח (s-m-ch) — in his response. As with his usage of the ה-ל-ל

24. All verbal usages of *boast* or *glory* reflect the hitpael form of the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l): להתהלל, to be praised, to boast (of) oneself, or to glory (of) oneself.

25. English translations that are rendered as “who can [verb]” are generally expressed as “who [future tense of verb]” in the Hebrew Bible.

26. The word תהלה (tehilah) is not found in the Hebrew Bible, but it is used as the word for *boasting* in Romans 3:27 — “Where then is boasting?” — in an 1817 Hebrew translation of the New Testament. See ברית חדשה על פי משיח: געתק מלישון יון (London: A. Macintosh, 1817), 147.

(h-l-l) root, his use of the ט-מ-ח (s-m-ch) root is restricted to the beginning of his discourse (verses 11–16) and then again at the end of his discourse (verses 35–37), with only one mention of *joy* outside of these ranges, in verse 30. As with the root ה-ל-ל (h-l-l), I have divided the usage of the root ט-מ-ח (s-m-ch) into two separate tables, with the uses of the root at the beginning of his discourse in Table 3 and those at the end in Table 4

Table 3

Usage	Verse	English	Hebrew
1	11	my joy	(simchati) שמחתי
2	11	joy	(simchah) שמחה
3	11	I will rejoice	(esmach) אשמח
4	13	to rejoice	(lismoach) לשמוח
5	16	we will rejoice	(nismach) נשמח
6	16	our joy	(simchatnu) שמחתנו

Table 4

Usage	Verse	English	Hebrew
7	30	our joy	(simchatnu) שמחתנו
8	35	to rejoice	(lismoach) לשמוח
9	35	to rejoice	(lismoach) לשמוח
10	35	my joy	(simchati) שמחתי
11	36	my joy	(simchati) שמחתי
12	37	my joy	(simchati) שמחתי

As we can observe in Table 3, the first six uses of *joy* or *to rejoice* fit the parameters of polyptotonic wordplay extremely well, with each use a unique employment of the root ט-מ-ח (s-m-ch). However, the final six occurrences of the root (see Table 4) rely on repetitious employment of previously utilized forms of ט-מ-ח (s-m-ch). Ammon's usage of this root might also reveal a simple chiasmic-type structure:

From Table 3:

A Joy (my joy, joy)

B Rejoicing (I will rejoice, to rejoice, we will rejoice)

A Joy (our joy)<sup>27</sup>

27. Note: The two chiasmic structures are book-ended by the phrases *my joy* and *our joy*, but in reverse order from each other.

From Table 4:

A Joy (our joy)

B Rejoicing (to rejoice, to rejoice)

A Joy (my joy, my joy, my joy)

Because Ammon's usage of the root  $\text{ח-מ-ח}$  (s-m-ch, meaning *joy* or *to rejoice*) is so closely connected with his use of the root  $\text{ה-ל-ל}$  (h-l-l, meaning *to praise* or *to boast*) — in both physical placement and in meaning — it seems apparent that this repetition of roots was meant as intentional wordplay by Ammon. Perhaps of most importance for this paper, Ammon's repetitive usage of the roots  $\text{ה-ל-ל}$  (h-l-l) and  $\text{ח-מ-ח}$  (s-m-ch) possibly displays an underlying Hebrew linguistic structure in the original wording of his response to Aaron.

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