

# OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

## *Lesson 18*

### The Tabernacle

Recently, I had the privilege of visiting with Dr. Peter Williams, Warden of Tyndale House in Cambridge, England. Tyndale House is a residential center (since it is in England, perhaps we should say “centre”) for Biblical research that many credit as a “rudder” in evangelical theology. Scholars ranging from D. A. Carson, J. I. Packer, John Piper, and others have spent time studying and working there.

As might be expected, Peter, as Warden of the center, is quite a biblical scholar himself. Carrying multiple degrees, he works effortlessly through a number of Bible related languages, including not only the Greek and Hebrew of Scripture, but also languages like Syriac that aid in serious study of the meaning of parts of the Bible. Peter will be teaching Hebrew at Cambridge University in the upcoming session.

In my interchanges with Peter, we were on the subject of Old Testament images and Peter noted his hesitancy to read into Old Testament passages and images New Testament meanings. I concur with Peter wholeheartedly. The temptation is often overwhelming to see in a passage, a doctrine or idea that is already special or particularly meaningful to us. In a related sense, we occasionally hear of some wonderful and devout people finding images of Mary or Christ in everything from potato chips to pizza pans.

I join Peter’s concern because I often hear people, and perhaps have been personally guilty of, injecting something into the Old Testament that is not really there on its own. This has occurred in regard to the tabernacle (or its later Old Testament counterpart, the temple), which we study in this lesson. I have one friend who is confident that the semblance of the tabernacle/temple was to portray the Roman Catholic Church. The Holy of Holies corresponds to the Pope, the Holy Place the clergy, and the outer courtyard the laity. I have another friend who would take issue with such a Catholic position. He sees the same tabernacle/temple as representing the body, soul, and spirit of a person. He reasons the body is the outer courtyard, the soul is the Holy Place, and the spirit is the Holy of Holies where God dwells.

Examining the tabernacle or the temple does not help decide who is right, nor should it be done that way. The truth or falsity of a theology or doctrine is not measured by an archetype or model. The theology or doctrine needs to stand on its own thorough examination of Scripture and solid reasoning.

Does that mean, however, there is no place to find pictures, images, and archetypes in Old Testament figures and stories? Of course not! It means that it should be done with caution! The theology or doctrine should stand on its own without the link to the Old Testament image or story. There are places in the New Testament where inspired authors make the link. In those cases, we have an orthodox representation, yet we still should exercise caution taking such relationships beyond their explicit New Testament usage.

Perhaps the most compelling New Testament interpretation of Old Testament events or fixtures is found in the book of Hebrews as it relates to the tabernacle the Israelites constructed in the wilderness. As we consider the tabernacle in this lesson, we will observe lessons and parallels given in New Testament Scripture. We will also see several other apparent relationships that seem present, but once we leave the illustrations of Scripture, we tread lightly through the other pictures!

Before leaving this introduction, I urge you to investigate the Tyndale House ministry at [www.TyndaleHouse.com](http://www.TyndaleHouse.com). It is a worthy endeavor for which to pray and contribute!

## **THE TABERNACLE**

The book of Exodus tells thrilling stories of Moses' encounter with God before the burning bush, Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh, the actual departing of the Israelites from Egypt, the Pharaoh's ensuing chase with the parting of the Re(e)d Sea, the trip to Sinai, and the delivery of the Ten Commandments.<sup>1</sup> Yet, almost half of the book of Exodus is dedicated to instructions about constructing the tabernacle, its various parts, and specific stories that interlace with it.

The tabernacle's importance to Israel cannot be overstressed. It was the meeting place for God and his people. It was the place of sacrifice and service by the priests. It was considered the dwelling or palace of God on earth among his people. As God instructed Moses,

And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst (Ex. 25:8).

In the tabernacle, we see the paradoxical expressions: that God is holy (meaning "set apart") from all humanity, yet God was also in the midst of the Israelite people.

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<sup>1</sup> Lessons on these stories, their theological implications, and the current archaeological information are available in written form, mp3, or video at the lessons tab on the class website [www.Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com).

In setting out the construction of the tabernacle, God gave Moses very specific instructions. As the tabernacle was the tented palace for God the King, it was to be made to God's exacting specifications!

Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and all of its furniture, so you shall make it (Ex. 25:9).

With such exactness, and with pages of instructions to Moses on the construction, one might think that we could easily redraw the tabernacle and see it in its wonder today. Unfortunately, that is not true! While we can find drawings of the tabernacle (on page 186 in the ESV Study Bible for example<sup>2</sup>), we must recognize that such drawings involve a great deal of interpretation. There are extensive instructions in Exodus, but those instructions are not complete. No doubt this is part of the significance that Moses make it as God *showed* him.

Then you shall erect the tabernacle according to the plan for it that you were shown on the mountain (Ex. 26:30).<sup>3</sup>

We join with Orthodox scholar Georges Barrois who wrote,

The technical terms of uncertain or unknown etymology in the Hebrew text and their renderings in the versions make nigh hopeless all attempts as figuring out what the tabernacle looked like; a large measure of skepticism regarding most of the reconstructions found in Biblical handbooks and encyclopedias is advisable.<sup>4</sup>

Still those drawings serve a good purpose of helping to orient us to the basic shapes, placements, and even relevant sizes of the constituent parts of the tabernacle. In other words, do not hesitate to look at them, just recognize them for what they are!

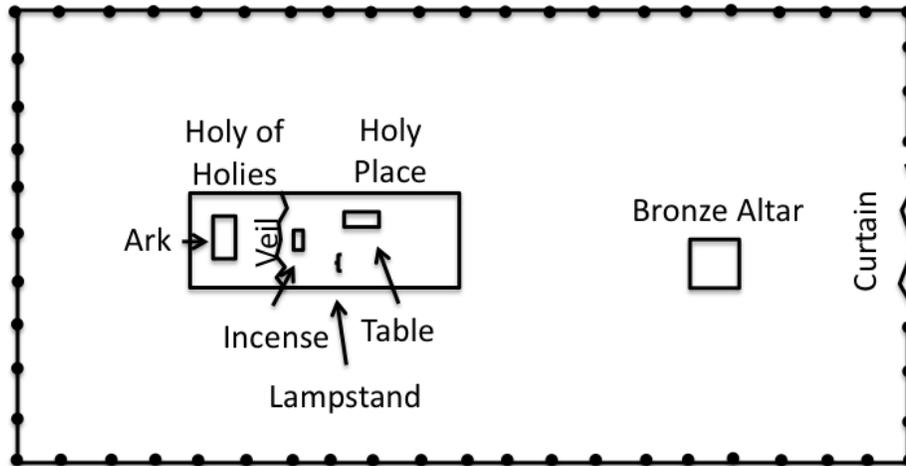
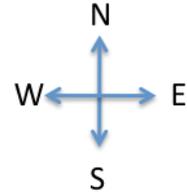
Scripture did not preserve us a drawing, it preserved certain instructions by God. Those instructions give us the data we need to better understand the message God delivers through the tabernacle. With that warning, we now produce a basic drawing of the Tabernacle!

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<sup>2</sup> *ESV Study Bible*, (Crossways Bibles 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See also Ex. 25:9, 40; 27:8; Num. 8:4.

<sup>4</sup> Barrois, Georges A., *Jesus Christ and the Temple*, (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press 1980) at 33. A related issue exists on some stark differences between the Hebrew text of Exodus passages on constructing the Tabernacle with the same passages in the Greek Septuagint. For a discussion of these issues, see, Gooding, D. W., *The Account of the Tabernacle*, (Cambridge 1959).



## The Layout

The tabernacle itself was a tent that was constructed of poles, layered coverings, and curtains. The tent was not what you would buy today at a camping supply store. It had poles, but they were made of wood, rather than modern plastic. The coverings and curtains/walls were made from different materials (linen, tanned ram skins, and goats hair) (Ex. 26:7, 14, 31, 36). The tent was about 45 feet long and 15 feet high.<sup>5</sup>

The tent was constructed in a courtyard surrounded by a fence. The courtyard was about 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. It was also built to God's exacting instructions (Ex. 27:9-19; 38:9-17). In the confines of the courtyard, but not in the tabernacle/tent, was the bronze altar for the sacrifices of the people.

The Tabernacle/tent area was divided into two sections: the Holy Place and the Holiest Place (also called the "Holy of Holies" or the "Most Holy Place"). The

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<sup>5</sup> We do not know the precise measurements because the Scripture uses the Hebrew term "cubit." The cubit was originally thought to be a measurement of the elbow to the fingertip. Of course, that varied from person to person, and some scholars think the cubit itself varied between two different sizes. The figures above, however, are fair approximations based on a cubit as roughly 1 ½ feet.

Holy Place was the first 30 feet of the Tabernacle/tent and in it was the “Table of Presence,” an “altar of incense,” and a “golden lampstand.”

The Holiest Place was the back 15 feet of the tabernacle/tent. It was separated from the Holy Place by a curtain built and embroidered specially for that purpose. This Holiest Place held the Ark of the Covenant. We will consider each of these furnishings starting in the Holiest Place and working outward into the Holy Place and then the courtyard.

### **The Ark of the Covenant**

Anyone who has seen the Indiana Jones movie has some idea of what the Ark of the Covenant may have looked like. Let us set aside the movie as we consider the genuine Ark and its role in the dwelling place of God.

The Ark was about 3 foot 9 inches long, 2 foot 3 inches high, and 2 foot 3 inches wide. It was made of acacia wood and overlaid inside and out with pure gold. Moses was instructed to place the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments inside the Ark. A seat was made to go on top of the ark. This seat served as God’s throne. It was made of pure gold overlaying acacia wood. There were two cherubim on each side of the seat’s saddle, perhaps like armrests. The seat’s saddle seems to have been the wings of the cherubim spread forth over the top of the lid. The seat/lid itself was called a “mercy seat.” Above this mercy seat, atop the cherubim wings, God would meet Moses.

There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you... (Ex. 25:22).

The ark itself was holy as God’s throne.<sup>6</sup> As 1 Samuel 4:4 notes, the “LORD of hosts...is enthroned on the cherubim.” The ark was not to be touched by human hands, but had rings and poles for carrying and moving it. Even these poles were used under specific instructions.

### **The Table of Presence**

Exodus 25:23ff gives the instructions for the construction of the Table of Presence that was found in the holy area, just in front of the Holy of Holies. This table was about 3 feet long, 1 foot 6 inches wide, and 2 foot 3 inches high. It was also made

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<sup>6</sup> Mackie points out, “The OT virtually equates the ark of the covenant, and especially its lid, the mercy seat, with the throne of God.” Mackie, Scott D., *Eschatology and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Mohr Siebeck 2007) at 166. He cites the 4Q Targum of Leviticus as replacing the Hebrew word for “mercy seat” with “throne.”

of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. The plates and dishes that went with it were pure gold as well.

This table received weekly twelve loaves of bread (as set out in Lev. 24:5-9). These loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel. In the midst of the awe and beauty of the tabernacle and its altars, this table was a constant visual reminder that the people of God were continually before his presence.

### **The Altar of Incense**

God instructed that the Israelites make an altar of incense of acacia wood overlaid with pure gold. It was about 3 feet high and 1 foot 6 inches square in width. This altar stood in the Holy Place with incense burned before the presence of God and the Holiest Place. The High Priest was to burn special incense dedicated to God each morning and evening as he tended the lamps in the lampstand.

### **The Golden Lampstand**

The Holy Place also held a golden lampstand. The lampstand was made with a central trunk and six “branches,” three out each side. The lampstand itself was a model of an almond tree in bloom. The cups were even made to look like almond blossoms.

### **The Tabernacle/Tent Curtains**

The Tabernacle/tent had a front curtain as it was placed in the courtyard. This curtain served as the door or gate. It also blocked off the Holy Place from the general courtyard. God set out another curtain (also called a veil) to keep separate the Holiest Place from the Holy Place. The curtains that separated the Tabernacle/tent from the rest of the courtyard were embroidered with Cherubim.

The whole appearance and substance of the Tabernacle/Tent gives strong reminders of the Garden of Eden. The cherubim sat watch and guarded the entrance to the tabernacle (embroidered as they were on the curtain) much like the cherubim were set to guard the entrance to Eden, lest Adam and Eve sought to return and eat of the tree. The Cherubim guarded Eden from the East, as would these Cherubim when the tabernacle/tent was properly constructed facing east.<sup>7</sup> Eden itself was a place noted for its location to Havilah, a source of gold (Gen. 2:11-12). Of course, all furnishings of the Holy Place and the Holiest Place were overlaid with gold. The two trees in Eden were the tree of life, which many scholars see echoed in the construction of the lampstand as a fruiting almond tree, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. This tree of knowledge of good and evil many scholars see echoed in the Ten Commandments placed within the Ark.

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<sup>7</sup> The front of the Courtyard/Tabernacle/tent faced east according to Ex. 27:13.

Whether the tabernacle is seen as a step to restore Eden, or as a reminder of Eden, or simply as a place where God would again speak with man, God set out the fixtures with precision.

### **Other Furnishings and Accoutrements**

God instructed the Israelites to construct a bronze altar for the general courtyard. This was the altar where most sacrifices were made. While the fixtures in the holy areas of the tabernacle/tent were made of gold, as the distance from the throne increased, and as the proximity to the common people increased, the value of the materials used in construction moved from the rarer materials to the more common (gold closest to God, then silver and bronze).

God also instructed construction of a bronze basin for washing of the priests. There were other bronze tools constructed for use in the sacrifices.

The priests themselves were required to wear special clothes as they administered to the LORD. Notably among the instructions, the High Priest wore a pure gold plate on the forehead of his turban that read “Holy to the LORD” (Ex. 28:36).

## **THE SIN OF ISRAEL**

God gave these most holy instructions to Moses while Moses was on the mountain. God showed Moses how these things should look. God called by name Oholiab and Bezalel as two Israelites in whom he had placed the skills to oversee and do this exacting work. God set this out with care to note the incredibly holy nature and the need for precision that should evoke great awe in the people.

During this same time, the people decided to make a god of their imagination (a calf) and had Aaron construct the idol in gold. With great partying and revelry, the people in an appalling, tawdry, self-devised fashion, created their idea of God and his worship that could not have been further from the holiness of what God was revealing to Moses.

Even as I type this, I wonder how often I substitute my own decisions about God, his character, his plans, and how I fit into them. May God have mercy upon us and upon the irreverence of our impetuosity, our self-centeredness, and our ignorance!

## **THE TRUE THRONE OF GOD**

We turn now to the New Testament, and especially the book of Hebrews, to see insight into God’s design given to Moses and the truth that lay behind the model. Scott Mackie correctly noted,

The Heavenly Sanctuary dominates the symbolic landscape of Hebrews.<sup>8</sup>

A study of Hebrews readily shows reasons for God's instruction that the Tabernacle/tent be built *exactly* as shown. Over and over Hebrews builds upon the earthly Tabernacle to explain and show the intercessory work of Christ as sacrifice and priest. The earthly Tabernacle/tent also provides the image for understanding the Heavenly Sanctuary as the actual throne of God.

This is a reason why God was so specific in his instructions to Moses:

[Those serving in the Tabernacle/Temple] serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown to you on the mountain." (Heb. 8:5).

Hebrews begins setting the tone for comparing the true throne of God with the tabernacle in the very first verse:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son (Heb. 1:1-2).

In Christ the Son, we see God not only speaking, but we also see God. Jesus is not only the radiance of God's glory, but is "the exact imprint of his nature" who having finished "making purification for sins" then "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). In Tabernacle terms (and its Temple counterpart), Jesus is set out in these opening verses as sacrificial ("making purification") either as priest and/or sacrifice. Jesus is also set out as being in the Most Holy Place where God is enthroned above the Ark. The exalted Christ now reigns enthroned with the Almighty at God's right hand.

Hebrews quickly adds that Christ is, accordingly, "much superior to angels" (Heb. 1:4). This is a picture that Hebrews later expands, but again harkens to the Ark of the Covenant. The "glory" of the LORD, of which Christ is the radiance, descended and hovered above the mercy seat with the angelic cherubim spreading their wings out as a welcoming seat for the Almighty and now the Lord Jesus is at his right hand.<sup>9</sup> As the Lord "sits enthroned upon the cherubim" (Ps. 99:1), so does Christ!

Hebrews goes on to explain that while the tabernacle was an earthly model of the LORD's true throne room, the Levitical priests that serviced that earthly model

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<sup>8</sup> Mackie at 155.

<sup>9</sup> Once the tabernacle was completed and set up, as the glory of the LORD descended, not even Moses was able to enter (Ex. 40:35).

were only types of priests compared to Christ. Christ administered his new covenant as High Priest in the true throne room. Hebrews 9:24 explains,

For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

So Christ is,

a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:17);

as well as,

the high priest of our confession who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house (Heb. 3:1).

While Jesus was faithful as was Moses, Christ is "worthy of more glory than Moses" as is fitting for the builder/owner of the house rather than simply a servant of the house (Heb. 3:6).

Christ actually performed the true actions that were symbolized by the actions of the priests in the tabernacle (and subsequent temple) services. Christ did these in every way superior to the earthly forms that were under the Mosaic covenant.

Moses' covenant produced the tabernacle/tent that held the precious items of the lamp stand, and the table with the bread of the presence. These were holy items in a holy place (Heb. 9:2). Behind a second curtain was a Most Holy Place that had the ark with the tablets of covenant (the Ten Commandments), an urn with manna, Aaron's staff, the covering of the cherubim of glory above the mercy seat and immediately before the curtain separating the Most Holy Place was a golden altar of incense.<sup>10</sup> But with all the holiness that was in these items and places, they were still representations, not the actual dwelling place of God. Christ served in the true presence of God and in this sense, Christ served in

...the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) (Heb. 9:11).

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<sup>10</sup> This was actually the edge of the curtain, but in the holy place rather than the most holy place. See the discussion on the language of Hebrews at Koester, Craig R., *The Dwelling of God: The Tabernacle in the Old Testament, Intertestamental Jewish Literature, and the New Testament*, The Catholic Bible Association of America 1989) at 175; Ellingworth, Paul, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Eerdmans 1993) at 425-427; Gheorghita, Radu, *The Role of the Septuagint in Hebrews: An Investigation of its Influence with Special Consideration to the Use of Hab 2:3-4 in Heb 10:37-38* (Mohr Siebeck 2003) at 88-89. Gheorghita did his work cited here at Tyndale House, the place spoken of in the introduction to this lesson.

Because Christ was in a greater and more perfect tent, it did not need the ritual sacrificial cleansing of the earthly Tabernacle/tent:

Thus it was necessary for the copy of the heavenly things to be purified with these rites, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Ex. 9:23-24).

Christ passed right through, not as a High Priest from Aaron's lineage, but a greater High Priest, one called by God for all time. Christ entered as a High Priest after the Order of Melchizedek. Christ did not pass through the image that was the earthly temple/tabernacle/tent. Christ passed through the actual heavens into the presence of God (Heb. 4:14).

### **Implications**

What does this mean for the person in Christ? Hebrews teaches several impacts on the believer. First, we have peace with God. Christ went as a forerunner on our behalf to make true intercession. Hebrews 7:25 explains:

Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

This intercession is full and complete. Christ entered into the real throne room, and upon finishing his work,

He sat down at the right hand of God (Heb. 10:12).

This gives the believer a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul (Heb 6:19). We have confidence to enter the true holy places ourselves by the blood of Jesus, with the assurance of faith and a conscience made clean. This allows us:

1. To draw near to God,
2. To hold fast our confession of hope without wavering, and
3. To stir one another up to good works as we assemble together in worship (Heb. 10:19-25).

A second implication involves the new covenant established. Hebrews teaches that Christ exceeded the priest system in place through Moses, exceeded the sacrifices of that system, and served in the real sanctuary as opposed to the representative one given through Moses. In like manner, the covenant that Jesus brought forth exceeds and replaces the covenant of Moses.

Quoting Jeremiah 31:33 Hebrews explains,

This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds (Heb. 10:16).

Moses took the Israelites to the Promised Land, but the people were rebellious and, as God swore, never entered into his rest:

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your fathers put me to the test and saw my works for forty years. Therefore I was provoked with that generation, and said, “They always go astray in their heart; they have not known my ways.’ As I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.” (Heb. 3:7-11).

This new covenant is a covenant of rest. This theme is repeated in Hebrews:

We who have believed enter that rest (Heb. 4:3).

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God’s rest has also rested from his works as God did from his (Heb. 4:8-10).

## **CONCLUSION**

Hebrews expressed concern that the people of God, in the covenant relationship made possible through the work of Christ, not miss God’s rest like the Israelites did as they wandered through the wilderness for forty years. We have a compelling reason to “rest” in God. We can and should enjoy the peace in knowing God and being found in him with his righteousness.

Moses constructed, at God’s instructions, a place where the holy God would come into the midst of his people. Jesus has changed the situation. He has now made us a holy people who can dwell in the midst of God! How could anyone say, “No thank you!”

## **POINTS FOR HOME**

1. “Exactly as I show you...so you shall make it.” (Ex. 25:9).

God was very clear to Moses. He did not say, “Make it however you’d like it.” Nor did he say, “One way’s as good as another!” He was explicit in his instructions, “Exactly as I show you...” God had reasons far beyond what Moses knew or understood. God was at work in a much bigger drama that was unfolding over thousands of years. The great Moses worked in

humble obedience to God. Why is that so hard for us? Why do we insist on forcing our own way, seeking the role in our life that rightfully belongs to God? And then we wonder why we never enter his rest, why we never have the peace that comes from full acceptance before him. “Exactly as I show you...so you shall make it.”

2. “...we have confidence to enter the holy places.....” (Heb. 10:19).

If you ever wanted to enter the holy place, you needed to be high priest. If you wanted to enter the Most Holy place, you needed to be the High Priest on the one day of the year that such was allowed. Yet in Christ, we have access to the holy places –plural. We have access not only to the Holy, but to the Holy of Holies—to the very throne room of Almighty God. We can enter with confidence that we belong, bought by the blood of the lamb that is sitting on the very throne of God at his right hand. Approach him in prayer, approach him in praise, and approach him in need. The curtain is ripped and the access is yours!

3. “*Christ will come again to save.*” (Heb. 9:28).

Jesus finished his work and he sits at the right hand of God. But he will come again to take his children home. That promise is made and that promise will be kept. Let our lives reflect our voices as we say, “Amen, Come Lord Jesus!”

### **WANT MORE?**

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