

How Childhood Trauma Created Christian Myth— And Why It Matters to Atheists

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Preface: As the title suggests, I wrote this article specifically for atheists, in particular those who identify with the "new atheist" movement. The article is posted at the website of the Richard Dawkins Foundation. The main presentation on Christianity overlaps extensively with that in some of my other writings. What is novel is the concluding section, in which, among other things, I offer an irenic perspective on the shared humanity of atheists and theists. This article may be copied and circulated freely so long as it is reproduced in its entirety as an integrated article, with the copyright notices intact, and circulated without charge. Copyright © 2016 Benjamin Abelow. For additional information about my research and writing: www.benjaminabelow.com

Amid heated debate about religion, a simple fact with profound implications has gone almost entirely unnoticed: that the myths underlying some of the most widespread religions portray themes related to childhood corporal punishment, abandonment, and neglect. Perhaps the presence of such themes should not be surprising, given that the world's major religions arose from historical contexts where abusive and traumatizing childrearing practices were a cultural norm. Of the religions widely practiced today, the traumatic themes are most transparent, pervasive, and close to the surface in the myths of Christianity—hence the focus of this article. To begin, we'll briefly review evidence pertaining to childhood corporal punishment in the West, with an emphasis on the ancient world in which Christianity arose. We'll then explore how themes of childhood trauma are reflected in Christian myth. At the end, I'll offer my thoughts about how these ideas may be of particular value to those who embrace atheism, rationalism, and humanism.

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Although patriarchy has been the dominant form of social organization in many cultures, patriarchy in the ancient Roman world, which provided the most immediate setting for the writing of the New Testament [1], was exceptionally explicit and well defined, forming a central element of Roman law, ethics, and self-perception. We can gain insight into how this patriarchal context affected children by considering two contemporary sources on the laws of *patria potestas* ("fatherly powers"), which were central to both jurisprudence and self-identity in the Roman Empire. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek teacher of rhetoric who lived in Rome from 30 to 8 BCE, wrote:

[T]he founder of the Roman constitution gave the father unrestricted power over his sons. That power was to remain until the father's death. He might imprison or beat him, chain him up and send him to work in the country, or even execute him. [2]

Gaius, in his influential second-century CE textbook of Roman law, describes how the same laws applied to both slaves and children:

Some persons are legally independent, some are subject to another. [O]f those subject to another, some are in *potestas* [power].... Slaves are in *potestas* of their masters. This *potestas* rests on universal law, for it is observable that among all peoples alike, masters have power of life and death over their slaves.... Also in our *potestas* are any of our children who are the offspring of a lawful marriage. This right is peculiar to Roman citizens, for there are virtually no other peoples who have such power over their children as we have.... [3]

These two quotations are of special significance to us because they chronologically bracket the roughly 100-year period (ca. 50 to 150 CE) when virtually all the books of the New Testament were written.

While the execution of children by fathers was probably extremely rare, harsh corporal discipline of children, especially sons, was common and is attested by numerous sources. A few examples follow, arranged in rough chronological order, starting in the century before the birth of Christianity. The *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1st century BCE) advocates that parents and teachers “chastise [corporally punish] the young with special severity” (4.17.25) to shape them for a virtuous life. Cicero (106-43 BCE) indicates that boys could be beaten by fathers, mothers, grandfathers, and teachers [4]. Seneca (3 BCE-65 CE) explains that children are beaten for the same reason that animals are, “so that the pain overcomes their obstinacy” (*De Constantia Sapientis* 12.3). Seneca also describes how the father’s role was primarily disciplinary, in contrast to maternal nurturance (*Essay on Providence* 2.5). Quintilian (35-95 CE) indicates that, during beatings, Imperial Roman children often became so terrified that they lost bowel or bladder control. “When children are beaten,” he writes, “the pain and fear often have results which it is not pleasant to speak of and which will later be a source of embarrassment.” (*Institutio Oratoria*, 1.3.16). The medical authority Galen (130-200 CE) indicates that corporal discipline could begin in infancy: once children reach about one year of age, they “can be made to obey by the use of blows, threats, reprimands, and admonishments” (Oribasius, *Libri incerti*, 17). The New Testament itself asserts that corporal punishment by fathers was actually universal, at least among legitimate male children. The book of Hebrews, written around 65 CE and reflecting Roman cultural norms, states flatly that “all” sons are punished and then asks, “For what son is he whom the father does not chastise?”—and answers: “If you are without chastisement... then are you bastards and not sons” [Hebrews 12:7-8]. Similar norms probably existed among Jews, as they did in many other cultures. For example, the two most important first-century CE Jewish sources, Philo and Josephus, both write approvingly of Mosaic laws that make offenses against one’s parents a capital crime. Regarding punishment for ordinary childhood disobedience, the well-known spare-the-rod type admonitions of Hebrew wisdom literature, in particular Proverbs and Sirach, were almost certainly operative [5]. Although most of our historical focus in this article is on the early formative period of Christianity, when the books of the New Testament were being written, it is important to note that similar patterns of corporal punishment persisted throughout Western history and, too often, have continued into the present.

Holding in mind these endemic patterns of childhood corporal discipline in the ancient world, especially that inflicted by fathers on sons to enforce obedience—the stereotypical pattern—let us consider the writings of the New Testament, looking both at the New Testament’s core theological narrative and its primary salvation teaching.

A central theme of the New Testament’s narrative is that the Son, Jesus, suffers corporally according to the will of his (heavenly) Father. A few examples follow. According to Paul, the Father “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all” [Romans 8:32]. In John’s Gospel, Jesus rebukes Peter when he tries to prevent Jesus’ capture by the Romans: “the cup which my Father has given me, shall I not drink it?” [18:11] The cup, of course, represents the suffering that Jesus knows awaits him. In John’s Gospel, the Father, speaking in “a voice from heaven,” indicates his direct role in the crucifixion [12:27-28]. The Acts of the Apostles states that Jesus was “delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” [Acts 2:23]. In fact, Acts explicitly says that all human participants in the crucifixion were merely intermediaries who were “were gathered together” by the Father to carry out His plan [Acts 4:27-28]. In describing the heavenly Father as the source of his Son’s suffering, the New Testament closely tracks the actual historical situation of ordinary children, especially sons, in the ancient world.

The New Testament narrative also reflects the inner psychological reality of the child. At Gethsemane, Jesus grapples with thoughts of his impending Passion. In the Gospels of Matthew [26:38] and Mark [14:34], Jesus is “very sorrowful, even to [the point of] death.” In Luke’s Gospel [22:44], Jesus is in emotional “agony.” In the book of Hebrews [5:7], Jesus emits “loud cries and tears.” Responding to these intense inner states of devastation and desolation, Jesus begs his Father not to proceed: “Father, all things are possible for you; remove this cup from before me” [Mark 14:35-36; Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42]. These portrayals of the Son parallel the emotional agony and desperate pleading of ordinary children when faced with corporal punishment. In the end, Jesus resigns himself to his fate, saying, “Father...not what I will, but what you will” [Mark 14:36; Matt. 26:39, Luke 22:42]—a posture of filial submission much like that forced upon corporally punished children since time immemorial. Thus, in the image of Jesus, we encounter an almost perfectly formed mythic representation of the external circumstances, feeling states, behavioral reactions and, ultimately, volitional collapse of the corporally punished child.

Reflections of childhood fears of a punishing father are likewise present in the New Testament. In the Gospel of Luke [12:4-5], Jesus says of the Father: “I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear him!” The letter to the Ephesians [2:2-3] makes clear that the Father’s wrath arises in response to the disobedience of his human children. In the very first lines of the earliest known Christian text, Paul’s letter to the Thessalonians, ca. 50 CE, we read of the central role of fear in early conversions to Christianity: the Thessalonians turned from idols to God and waited for “Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come” [1 Thess. 1:9-10]. Almost three and a half centuries later, Augustine asserts: “Very rarely, no never, does it happen that someone comes to us with the wish to be Christian who has not been struck by some fear of God” (*On Catechizing the Uninstructed*, 5.9). These extraordinary statements provide deep insight into the psychological world within which Christianity first spread—a world that appears to have been pervaded by fear of the father, a fear that was readily displaced onto the theological realm.

Remarkable parallels with ordinary childhood are also present in the New Testament's most important and explicit salvation teaching. When children are punished, the proximate cause may be quite varied, depending on the particular circumstance and the nature of the parental demand that has been violated. But the ultimate cause is general and homogeneous: the child is punished for disobedience. Disobedience is the quintessential "crime" of childhood. Conversely, the essential and required route for avoiding punishment, and for obviating the escalation of punishment once punishment has begun, is obedience. Notice that if a child is punished because of disobedience, and punishment is obviated because of obedience, the child is effectively *saved* from punishment by obedience. The theological parallels are obvious: disobedience—Adam's sin in the Biblical garden—leads to Paternal punishment for humans; whereas obedience to the Father—the behavioral and attitudinal stance of Jesus—leads to salvation. This concept is expressed most clearly in Paul's letter to the Romans, which became foundational for Christianity:

Then as one man's [Adam's] trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's [Jesus'] act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. [Romans 5:18-19]

Observed that for both the child within the family and the believer within the Pauline framework, salvation is attained through filial obedience, that is, obedience of the child to the parent, especially to the father. The parallel is rendered yet more precise by the fact that human beings are, within the Christian framework, themselves considered children of the heavenly Father. Thus, in both ordinary childhood and Christian teachings about damnation, it is *children* who are subject to punishment by the father/Father. The parallelism is found deeper still when we note that Adam himself, who is understood to be the source of disobedience, is considered to be "the Son of God" [Luke 3:38] and, as many commentators have observed, his sin has a distinctly child-like quality to it [6]. Thus, the clear connotation of the biblical text is that Adam's sin is a specifically filial disobedience.

Understood on its own terms, the central function of Christianity as a salvation religion is to provide a metaphysically constructed process by which the believer, who is mythically construed as child, replaces filial disobedience with filial obedience. This objective is epitomized in the phrase: "to die to the self and be reborn in Christ"—which means: to die to the innately disobedient self, which is identified with Adam, and to be reborn in the preternaturally obedient Child, Jesus. When one recognizes that Adam and Jesus represent and personify, respectively, filial disobedience and obedience, the underlying meaning and psychological import of the Christian salvation structure becomes clear: it is a system that mythically recapitulates a central traumatic theme from childhood, providing the believer a way to escape punishment by metaphysically realigning him or herself from a state of disobedience to one of obedience. By mythically renouncing the disobedient childhood self, and becoming totally obedient in and through Christ, the believer, conceptualized as a child, seeks to avoid punishment—punishment that for most of history, and too often still, was unavoidable in actual childhood.

These same concepts are evident in the Christian ritual (or, more specifically, sacramental) structure, which embody and give behavioral expression to the underlying salvation myth. This is most obvious within the context of Paul's baptismal theology, which conceptualizes immersion as a ritually constructed death of the old, willfully disobedient self, which is identified with Adam, and emersion as a rising, in

new life, with or in the fully obedient Christ-Child. In fact, this sequence of ritually constructed death (of the willful childhood self) and birth (of the new, obedient, Christ-like self) is often understood as being mystically tied directly to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus: the disobedient self is said to be crucified with or through Jesus, just as the new self is resurrected with or through him [Romans 6:3-4]. Here it should be pointed out that in attempting to sacramentally effect a change of identification from disobedient Adam to obedient Jesus, the individual is, without conscious awareness, undertaking *voluntarily*, on the level of symbolic myth, the very process of inner transformation that the child, under threat of punishment, was *forced* to enact during childhood. For those familiar with the mechanisms and manifestations of psychological trauma, I will add that for the individual who was subject to the coercive suppression of the will during childhood, this sacramental process, in its self-directed and self-empowered retracing of a prior victimization, shows remarkable parallels with the phenomenon of post-traumatic behavioral repetition.

Broadly stated, we have been considering a process by which religious myths, including both narrative and salvational myths, engage individual minds and the culture at large by evoking powerful childhood emotions and a shared sense of ultimate truth in response to endemic, stereotypical childhood traumas. Remarkably, fundamental features of this process were recognized almost three centuries ago by Susannah Wesley—a devout religionist and the mother of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Christian Methodism. In a letter of 1732, Susannah explained her views on corporal punishment:

I insist on conquering the will of children betimes [i.e., early in life], because this is the only strong and rational foundation of a religious education, without which both precept and example will be ineffectual. . . . This is still more evident if we further consider that religion is nothing else than the doing the will of God, and not our own. . . . [7]

In this extraordinary passage, Wesley posits that the child's enforced submission to the will of the parent lays a necessary psychological and cognitive foundation for the later development of a belief system centered on submission to God. Wesley lived in a world very different from our own, and her ideas reflect a staunch advocacy of physical punishment. Yet her fundamental insights are profound, and are almost entirely concordant with the ideas we are considering here.

In the history of Western culture, childhood corporal punishment has consistently been viewed as both necessary and beneficial. Furthermore, the potential for psychological harm, even in the context of severe and potentially life-threatening physical punishment, has been at most dimly and inconsistently perceived. In this cultural context, it was not possible to grasp consciously or communicate literally about one's subjective experiences of trauma because the necessary foundation of understanding was lacking. However, a symbolic "language," such as that provided by Christianity, could fill the gap—making it possible to express, however indirectly and inadequately, the experience of endemic childhood suffering and its persistent effects in adults.

These same ideas pertain to the long history of child abandonment and neglect. Although less well known to most people than the history of corporal punishment, the abandonment and neglect of children has been endemic, even normative, in the West from ancient times almost to the present. Regarding the Roman Empire, which as we have noted provided the immediate context for the writing of the books of the New

Testament, the late Yale historian John Boswell estimated that of all children born in Rome during the first three centuries C.E., between 20 and 40 percent were abandoned [8]. High levels of abandonment persisted throughout the medieval period and much of the modern period as well. Writing primarily of the 18th and 19th centuries, the anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy [9] notes that European abandonment affected not tens or hundreds of thousands of babies, but millions; and historian and anthropologist David Kertzer [10] has shown that in mid-19th century Europe over 100,000 babies were abandoned annually. Various forms of “temporary abandonment” (e.g., the sending away of babies to wet nurse, or of young children to apprentice or work as maids), as well as overt physical and emotional neglect, have also been widespread.

In this context, consider the gospel portrayal of Jesus’ so-called Cry of Dereliction from the cross—“My God, My God, why have you abandoned me!” [Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34] This cry was taken verbatim from Psalm 22 in the Hebrew Scriptures and, in the Gospels, placed into the context of a Father-Son relationship. No longer is it a Hebrew’s generic lament to God; it is a Son crying out to his Father—just as we might expect of the countless children abandoned or neglected by *their* fathers. Thus, with respect to both corporal punishment and abandonment—two quintessential traumas of childhood—we find in the Passion of Jesus tight thematic parallels with the “passion” of ordinary children. This image of a Child abandoned by his Father provides a powerful resonance for any person who was neglected in childhood—something that remains all too common even in our own time and cultural circumstances. In previous centuries, when actual abandonment was widespread, the resonances likely were even more powerful.

Finally, we can see in Christian myth something that adds yet another layer of emotional power, depth, and resonance: an *inversion* of the actual childhood reality, one that “undoes” the real-world trauma it represents. I am speaking here of the Easter myth of resurrection, which portrays the child’s desperate need to believe that the horrors that he or she experienced were not ultimately real, permanent, and irreversible. Through the believer’s intense psychological identification with Jesus (understood within Christianity as a sharing in the life of Christ, or even a metaphysical merger or union with Christ) the reversal of Jesus’ corporal pain and abandonment becomes the believer’s as well. Thus, the potent resurrection vision of a loving, non-punitive, and endlessly enduring Child-Parent reunion can readily function as a powerfully attractive balm for the often-unmitigated terrors, longings, and permanent tragedies of this-worldly childhood. I suspect that it is this psychological substitution of a longed-for happy ending for an irremediable childhood actuality that explains the exaltation experienced by so many Christians in connection with the Easter vision of resurrection.

Thus, the Christian ideational structure, encompassing crucifixion, resurrection, and the closely intertwined salvation teachings of Paul, provides the believer, on the level of myth, both a powerful repetition of the original trauma and a means to “undo” or prevent it. This explanation is remarkably simple in its essential features. Yet it goes far in explaining not only the original development of the Christian myth in its ancient context but also the underlying motivation of the entire Christian religious endeavor for the past two millennia. It addresses the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of Christianity and ties them quite precisely to the historically documented realities of this-worldly childhood.

Before concluding, we need to briefly consider how the “translation” from the realm of childhood to the realm of myth could have occurred. We can parse the explanation into two groups of processes, which for simplicity we can describe as those that create mental content deep within the mind and those that bring this newly formed mental content into the outer world of human interaction and text creation.

In the first group, a variety of psychological mechanisms are relevant, including: (a.) the human mind’s natural tendency to create symbolic narratives that reflect the realities of life (evident in both figures of speech and dreams); (b.) the processes of early childhood memory, which retain mnemonic recollections that are highly durable yet are “non-autobiographical” in form (i.e., they are stored in memory without a clear connection to a sense of “self”) and can thus be experienced in other contexts; (c.) the fragmentation of memory that occurs with psychological trauma, followed by the reconstitution of the traumatic memory fragments in thematically related settings; and (d.) the “transference” of powerful childhood emotions into entirely different contexts, including much later in life. All these mechanisms and more likely played and continue to play a role. Individually or together, they provide the psychological foundation required for the mythicization of childhood themes.

In the second group of mechanisms—those that bring the newly formed mental content into the outer world of human interactions and text creation—at least two well-known processes likely played a role: the experience of “revelation,” such as those to which Paul attributed his knowledge of Christ and the gospel, and the oral transmission of narratives, such as that through which early stories about Jesus were passed by word of mouth before they were ultimately written down in the Gospels starting around the year 70. An experience perceived as revelation is a quintessential example of how an internal source of information can be misconstrued as arising from an external source, including an imaginary one; and oral traditions are well-recognized to be highly susceptible to ongoing modification in response to the needs and hopes of the community and individuals doing the transmitting. When occurring along with the foundational psychological mechanisms we described a moment ago, revelation experiences and the oral transmission of narratives can provide a ready vehicle for incorporating childhood themes into religious traditions and written texts, including those that later become canonical.

Finally, it is important to note that, in describing how symbolic and other psychological processes that pertain to childhood ultimately shaped Christian myth, I am not asserting that Christian myth arose through a psychological creation *ex nihilo*. Rather, the mythic structure of Christianity appears to have arisen largely through the modification, combination, and re-contextualization of preexisting religious and cultural elements. We have already noted Jesus’ Cry of Dereliction in the Gospel story—which is rooted in a specific, directional modification of a verse from the 22 Psalm of the Hebrew Bible. As another example, consider Isaiah’s image of a suffering servant [e.g. Isaiah 53], which many scholars believe provided a literary model for New Testament images of Jesus. In Isaiah, the servant is an ill-defined righteous innocent who suffers according to the will of God. But in the New Testament, the servant becomes a Son who suffers according to the will of his Father, thus more accurately reflecting the experiences of children in the New Testament’s formative context. Many similar examples could be offered. We thus can say that a pattern of stereotypical childhood trauma within a culture can act as an “organizing principle” in the formation of a religious myth, building thematically precise, emotionally resonant narratives from the cultural materials at hand.

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I hope by now it is clear just how strong is the logical, evidential, and theoretical basis of the argument I am making. From a cultural and scholarly perspective, it is difficult to overstate the importance of these ideas, given that Christianity has so fundamentally shaped the West's literature, philosophy, art, architecture, the structures and patterns of daily life, and much of the West's political and military history as well. The broadest implications of the argument presented here is that our entire culture and world has been shaped, even in some sense arisen in response to, the abuse of children.

Beyond their general importance, the ideas presented in this article may provide insights of particular value to those who embrace atheism, rationalism, and humanism. To conclude this article, I suggest that these ideas can provide:

1. More powerful naturalistic explanations for religion. Many naturalistic and scientific attempts to understand religion are rooted in an abstract or idealized understanding of what religion is, and they have relatively little to say about the particularities that form the actual substance of religions themselves. The ideas presented here can help account for the specific themes of religious myths, and the nature of their associated rituals and sacraments, by showing a point-by-point correspondence with well-documented patterns of human social interaction—in particular, patterns from the cognitively and emotionally formative period of childhood. These ideas are broadly applicable and can enrich a variety of perspectives on Christian origins. For example, they do not presuppose a particular position on the question of whether an “historical Jesus” can be excavated from (or was ever even present) beneath the layers of mythicization evident in the New Testament. In terms of cultural-evolutionary understandings of religion, including those that make use of the meme concept, the ideas in this article point to a highly important and largely unrecognized selective pressure that can influence the development, survival, and spread of religious ideas among or between cultures.

2. A deeper understanding of psychological motivations for religious belief. Debates between theists and atheists often take the form of arguments over questions of historical truth. It is thus understandable that, from the rationalist perspective, the religious world-view is often seen as having arisen, ultimately, from cognitive misperceptions. The approach I present here focuses attention on the powerful emotional and personal factors that may underlie and account for religious belief, and which may render the religionist's misperceptions resistant to change. For atheists who are trying to persuasively communicate a secular and humanistic vision of the cosmos to religious believers, the ideas in this article help make clear that the cognitive dimension of religious belief may be merely the visible tip of the iceberg.

3. Insight into the roots of religious trauma. As Dr. Richard Dawkins has repeatedly, powerfully, and eloquently emphasized, specific religious teachings, such as Christian ideas about hell, can have a deeply traumatizing effect on children. The ideas presented in this article can help one better contextualize and comprehend the source of these traumatic aspects of Christian myth. They make clear that trauma underlies trauma—that historically endemic patterns of childhood corporal punishment, enacted in a patriarchal context, ultimately explain the Christian emphasis on punishment by the heavenly Father. Here I should note that other scholars, especially the social historian Philip Greven (see, for example, his

Spare the Child) have explored the link between childhood corporal punishment and the fear of hellfire in depth; engagement with this scholarship can benefit those who wish to better understand these concepts.

4. *Increased recognition of our shared humanity.* Given the broad cultural climate, at least in the United States and other places where Christianity is still ascendant, and the great harm done by certain religious teachings to children and others, it is easy to understand how atheists might see themselves as an embattled minority confronting a dangerous and overwhelmingly powerful cultural force. On an individual level, the believer may even be viewed as an enemy of sorts, an “other” who represents and embodies a vast and powerful “them.” The ideas presented in this article can help one recognize that believers, through their embrace of the Christian mythic structure, may actually be expressing, without conscious awareness, a profound sense of vulnerability, victimization, and need. Once this possibility is recognized, it becomes easier to see the believer as someone who, like oneself, is trying—too often in the face of horrific childhood experiences and long psychological odds—to flourish emotionally, or even merely to endure. With this insight, the sense of eviscerating judgment may drop away and be replaced by a feeling of interpersonal connection. By drawing attention to the shared experience of childhood, an awareness of our shared humanity can come to the fore.

NOTES

[1] Most biblical scholars agree that the books which compose the New Testament were written in the broader Roman empire (not in Palestine) and that the language of composition was Koine (Hellenistic) Greek, the lingua franca of the Roman world.

[2] Gardner & Wiedemann (1991), p. 12

[3] Gardner & Wiedemann (1991), p. 5

[4] Discussed in Saller (1994), p. 147.

[5] Philo and Josephus endorse, and actually expand the scope of, the prescription of Deuteronomy 21:18-21. For Philo, see *The Special Laws*, 2.232 and 2.248. For Josephus, see *Against Apion*, Book 2:28. For Proverbs, see 13:24, 22:15, and 23:13. For Sirach, which was influential in Hellenistic communities in the first century BCE and very likely later, see 30:1-3 and 30:12.

[6] Of many examples, see e.g., Gunkel (1901/1997), pp. 1, 14, 19, 32; Speiser (1964, p. 25); Abelow (2010).

[7] Greven (1973), p. 48.

[8] Boswell (1990), p. 135.

[9] Hrdy (1999), p. 303.

[10] Kertzer (1993), p. 10

SOURCES

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