SAJRP Vol. 1 No. 2 (July/August 2020)

A SUFI ‘FRIEND OF GOD’ AND HIS ZOROASTRIAN CONNECTIONS:

The Paradox of Abū Yazīd al-Basṭāmī

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paradoxical relation between the famed Sufi ‘friend’ Abū Yazīd al-Basṭāmī (nicknamed Bāyazīd; d. 875 C.E. or less likely 848 C.E.) and his Zoroastrian connections. Bāyazīd is renowned as a pious ecstatic visionary who experienced dream journeys of ascent to the heavens, and made bold claims of intimacy with the Divine. The early source writings in both Arabic and Persian reveal a holy man overly concerned with the wearing and subsequent cutting of the non-Muslim *zunnār* or cincture. This became a metaphor of his constant almost obsessive need for conversion and reconversion to Islam. The *zunnār* also acts as a symbol of infidelity and his desire to constrict his lower ego *nafs*.

The experience of Bāyazīd shows the juxtaposition of Islam with other faiths on the Silk Road in 9th century Iran, and despite pressures to convert, other religions were generally tolerated in the early centuries following the Arab conquests. Bāyazīd’s grandfather was said to be a Zoroastrian and the family lived in the Zoroastrian quarter of their home town Basṭām in northeast Iran. Bāyazīd shows great kindness to his non-Muslim neighbours who see in him the best qualities of Sufi Islam. The sources record that his saintliness influenced many to become Muslims, not unlike later Sufi missionaries among Hindus and Buddhists in the subcontinent.

INTRODUCTION

Bāyazīd's fame as a friend of God is legendary in Sufi discourse. In his own lifetime, which probably covered most of the first three-quarters of the 9th century C.E., his fame spread far and wide, for example in receiving letters and emissaries from other noted ascetics such as Dhū 'l-Nūn the Egyptian (d. 860). In later typologies Bāyazīd is regarded as the 'drunken' Sufi par excellence in contrast to the 'sober' Junayd of Baghdad (d. 910).[1] What this distinction entails is debatable. It is clear that he was scrupulously renunciant like most of his contemporary well-known proto-Sufis. He was a visionary who experienced dream-ascents analogous to the heavenly journeys ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad (based on Qur'ān sūras 17 and 53). At the same time he encountered 'drunken' ecstatic states of consciousness and often spoke of his experiences in veiled sayings or paradoxical utterances.[2] His most famous saying, an outburst occasioned by an ecstatic state, was 'Praise be to me'! (*subḥānī*) in which he speaks as if in the voice of the Divine. This utterance was obviously shocking to many mainstream pundits, Sufi and non-Sufi alike. It is also clear, however, that his temperament was that of a recluse: he did not wish for fame and tried to discourage would-be followers who flocked to see him. He preferred to be labelled insane or an unbeliever when questioned about his obscure or paradoxical sayings. In his intimate converse with the Divine he is seeking nothing except what God wills, but he is reluctant to be called a leader or charismatic spokesman for his fellow Muslims.[3]

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[1]. Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period*. Edinburgh: University Press, 2007; and Jawid A. Mojaddedi, *The Biographical Tradition in Sufism*. Richmond (U.K.): Curzon Press, 2001.

[2]. Carl W. Ernst, *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism*. Albany: S.U.N.Y. Press, 1985; especially pp. 43-45.

SOURCES

The primary sources for the life and sayings of Bāyazīd and many other early Sufis are mostly from 10th, 11th and 12th century authors who wrote books in a variety of genres. These include *ḥadīth*-style compilations recording short sayings or deeds, apologetic/pedagogical/teaching manuals, dedicated hagiographical works, or a combination of these genres. Examples include the standard Arabic works such as Sarrāj's (d. 988) 'Book of Illuminations', an apologetic and teaching manual; Sulamī's (d. 1021) *ḥadīth*-style 'Generations of Sufis'; and Qushayrī's (d. 1072) famous 'Treatise', a dual genre book of both teaching and biography. There are also a number of original Persian writings such as 'Revealing the Veiled' by the Lahore based Hujwīrī (Data Ganj Bakhsh; d. circa 1075), and colourful commentaries on the early Sufis' ecstatic sayings by Rūzbihān Baqlī of Shiraz (d. 1209).[4]

For our present purposes, however, there are two main sources for Bāyazīd's encounters with Zoroastrians. The first is the 'Book of Light' compiled in Basṭām by Abu'l Faḍl Muḥammad Sahlagī (or Sahlajī; d. 1084), a keen promoter of Bāyazīd's legacy. He collected and preserved in Arabic the sayings, anecdotes and visionary discourses from family heirs and followers who remained in Basṭām. This collection is not an indulgent hagiography, however, as many of the sayings and stories are corroborated in the earlier sources such as those mentioned above. Sahlagī is particularly valuable for the light he sheds on the biographical details of Bāyazīd, his life, influence and associates in his home town.[5]

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[3]. Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*. New York: Paulist press, 1996, chapter 7.

[4]. For details of these see Karamustafa, op. cit.; and for Rūzbihān see Carl W Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī: Mysticism and the Rhetoric of Sainthood in Persian Sufism*. Richmond U.K.: Curzon Press, 1996.

The second main source is the famed 'Memorial of God's Friends' by Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār of Nishapur (d. circa 1220). This work is the most extensive, popular and influential collection of sayings and anecdotes about earlier Sufis in the Persian tradition. 'Aṭṭār is known as a lyric and didactic poet, his lengthy rhymed couplet (*mathnawī*) books were the model for Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī's (d. 1273) famous work. The 'Memorial' is 'Aṭṭār's only prose book, its language mellifluous and subtle, an exemplar of exquisite Persian prose. We are now well into colourful hagiographical territory, in the thrall of a master storyteller. Yet despite his lavish embellishment of earlier traditions, 'Aṭṭār also preserved sayings and stories not found in earlier sources but which were transmitted both orally and in writings now lost to us.[6]

ZOROASTRIAN CONNECTIONS

After the Arab conquest of Iran in the 7th century, Zoroastrianism, the former state religion, gradually lost its hold on the Iranian people. At first there was no mass conversion to the new faith but there was relentless and eventually successful pressure to adopt the Semitic faith for a number of reasons. The new political and taxation systems favoured Muslims. Those who did not convert were hurt financially as well as socially, becoming second class citizens, clients of the Arab elite. The language of government became Arabic, supplanting Pahlavi and other native Iranian languages. A steady stream of converts, some willing, some forced, increased over the generations until by the 10th or 11th century an estimated 90% of Iranians were at least nominally Muslim.[7]

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[5]. 'Abd al-Raḥman Badawī, *Shaṭaḥāt al-ṣūfiya, 1: Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī*. Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍat al-Miṣrīya, 1949.

[6]. Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'* ed. Muammad Isti'lāmī. Tehran: Zawwār, 1354 a.h.s. Translation in Paul Losensky, *Farid ad-Din 'Attār's Memorial of God's Friends: Lives and Sayings of Sufis*. New York: Paulist Press, 2009.

Yet although there were many reasons for conversion, whether from social or financial motives, or from genuine piety, there was much which held Iranians back from the new imposed religion. The centuries of tradition, language, culture, loyalty to ancestors, particularly among rural and unlettered Iranians, took generations to change. It is not surprising then that towns like Basṭām, in the Semnān province near Shāhrūd, away from the main centres of power and coercion, had a substantial Zoroastrian population in Bāyazīd's lifetime.

This brings us to the nexus of the present discussion. It is clear that Bāyazīd's ancestry was Zoroastrian. His forefathers were leading citizens of the town and probably priests (sg. *mūbad*) in the ancient rites. Sahlagī mentions by name his grandfather Surūshān (or Sharūshān) who was *majūsī* (English: Magi), and who converted to Islam. The family lived originally in the Mūbadān quarter of the town. This accounts for the contact Bāyazīd had with Zoroastrian neighbours, as will be expanded on below. However, Sahlagī also mentions that soon after his birth the family moved to the Arabized quarter of the town which was later named Buwīdhān in Bāyazīd's honour. This may be a retrospective enhancement of his image seeking to downplay his ancestry.[8]

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[7]. Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979, chapter 10.

A missing link is Bāyazīd's father who is barely mentioned in the sources and seems to have been absent or died when the child was young. Sahlagī, Hujwīrī and 'Aṭṭār mention that he was a prominent citizen of Basṭām, but little else.[9] His mother, on the other hand, lived into old age and had a powerful influence over Bāyazīd's spiritual development and religious upbringing.[10]

NARRATIVE TRADITIONS

One of the most important and symbolic stories is contained in both the main sources, illustrating the development of the biographical tradition over time. Sahlagī records that Bāyazīd had Zoroastrian (*majūsī*) neighbours with a young child who cried at night because they had no lamp. Being a good neighbour, Bāyazīd held up a lamp to their window until the child stopped crying. The parents marvelled at his compassion and sought his blessing on them, that they might find peace with God (*aslamū*) on the Day of reckoning.[11]

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[8]. op. cit., Badawī, pp. 60-63.

[9]. 'Alī b. 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-maḥjūb,* ed. V. Zhukovski. Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1336 a.h.s. p. 132; R. A. Nicholson (trans.), Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1982, p. 106. Op. cit., 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat*, p. 138; (trans.), op. cit. p. 189.

[10]. op. cit., 'Attār, *Tadhkirat*, pp. 138-142; op. cit., Losensky, pp. 189-192.

[11]. op. cit., Badawī, pp. 92-93.

ʻAṭṭār expands and embellishes the story to include the father's absence, and when he returned from a trip he was told by his wife of Bāyazīd's kindness. The neighbour declared 'now the Shaykh's light has come it would be a pity if we were to go back to our darkness', and he immediately came to Bāyazīd and converted to Islam.[12]

This wonderful narrative has meaning and symbolism on several levels. The irony that 'devotees of fire' did not have any light speaks of their spiritual darkness as much as their material poverty and social exclusion. They recognise Bāyazīd as a bearer of true light who illuminates their darkness, and who shows generosity and compassion toward unbelieving neighbours. ʻAṭṭār has them immediately converting to Islam (*muslimān shud*) because of the Shaykh's kindness, but this is a subtle departure from Sahlagī's original use of the verb *salima* (form IV), finding peace with God or submitting to His will.

Later in the 'Memorial', ʻAṭṭār preserves a saying which might be considered an additional comment on this story. With reference to the famous 'Light' verse of the Qur'ān (24:35), Bāyazīd said: "The heart of the one who knows God (*ʻārif*) is like a candle in a lantern made of pure glass whose rays illuminate the entire celestial world. What does it fear of the darkness"?[13]

Another anecdote in ʻAṭṭār's book concerns a Zoroastrian (*gabr*) who was invited to become a Muslim. He responds to the requester that 'If Islam is what Bāyazīd does, I don't have the strength for it and I can't do it. If it's what you do, I don't have any need of it'.[14] This reply shows both praise for Bāyazīd, his evident renown and fame as a holy man, while also disparaging the lacklustre faith of ordinary Muslims of the time. The man is unimpressed with the piety of everyday Muslims but he sees in the Shaykh an unobtainable commitment impossible to emulate. The contrast is astutely drawn and shows great honesty and sincerity.

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[12]. op. cit., ʻAttār, p. 152; op. cit., Losensky, p. 205.
[13]. op. cit., ʻAttār, p. 170; op. cit., Losensky, p. 228.

This short story from the 'Memorial' is amplified and embellished in Rūmī's typical style in the *Mathnawī*. Replying to someone inviting him to convert, the Zoroastrian says that the faith of Bāyazīd is too noble for him to attain:

> I cannot endure its glowing heat which is too bright for the struggles of my soul.
>
> Though I am not convinced about the Muslim faith (*īmān u dīn*) yet I am a firm adherent to *his* faith (*īmān-i ū*).[15]

There is great symbolism in Rūmī's poetry: the 'fire devotee' cannot endure the 'glowing heat' of the Sufi holy man's charismatic presence. But Rūmī goes on to elaborate that the Zoroastrian man's faith is indeed deeper and more profound than outward appearance would indicate. He in fact follows Bāyazīd's truer inner faith, though outwardly he may be an unbeliever.

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[14]. op. cit., 'Attār, p. 152; op. cit., Losensky, p. 205.

[15]. *The Mathnawī of Jalālu'ddīn Rūmī*, R. A. Nicholson (ed.), London: Gibb Memorial Trust, 1925-1940, Book 5, verses 3359-3360.

THE NON-MUSLIMS' CINCTURE

Since the beginnings of the Zoroastrian religion all believers, men and women alike, wore a girdle or cincture, passed three times around the waist and knotted at the back and front. This wearing of the girdle (Persian *kustī*) was obligatory, being untied and retied repeatedly during prayer.[16] After the Muslim conquests the Arabic term *zunnār* designated the girdle or cord worn not only by Zoroastrians but also Christians, Jews and others to indicate their non-Muslim status. The cincture eventually came to identify the inferior position of adherents to other faiths, not only as a religious symbol but as a social and economic marker as well. These people were known as *ahl al-dhimma*, free non-Muslim subjects who in return for paying the head tax (*jizya*) were granted protection and safety. In the sources relating to Bāyazīd he mostly has connection with those of the ancient Iranian faith, although there are a few anecdotes relating to Christians.

What is of interest here, however, is the way this age-old ritual became a religious and symbolic gesture which deeply affected the spiritual life of Bāyazīd, a supposed Sufi holy man and revered Shaykh. In the source texts we find many short anecdotes featuring the *zunnār* where typically he fastens the cincture around his waist in an act of contrition or penance. He then wishes not to untie and retie but more urgently to cut or sever the cord, a ritual act in which he almost never succeeds. The act becomes a metaphor of unbelief and reconversion and is coupled with his recalcitrant *nafs* (ego self / carnal self) as the locus of resistance to divine hegemony and total subservience to God.

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[16]. op. cit., Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, p. 31.

Sahlagī preserves a tradition which encapsulates Bāyazīd's attitude about this ritual act of wearing and cutting the cincture. He is reported to have said: ''When you stand before God, make yourself to be like a Zoroastrian (*majūsī*), wishing that you might cut the girdle (*zunnār*) in His presence''.[17] The Arabic of this saying is allusive: 'yourself' is not just the pronoun referring to the hearer (or reader) but it also refers to the *nafs*, that part of the human constitution which 'incites to evil' (Qur'ān 12:53; 75:2).
The ritual linkage between the cincture and prayer is picked up by 'Aṭṭār in the 'Memorial' in the following typical anecdote. Bāyazīd said: "I have been praying for years, and with every prayer I have believed with all my soul (*nafs*) that I am a Zoroastrian (*gabr*) and want to cut the infidel sash."[18]

It is instructive to compare the older traditions in Sahlagī with the embellishments made by 'Aṭṭār writing more than a century later. Sahlagī has Bāyazīd say:

> For twelve years I was the blacksmith (*ḥadād*) of my self (*nafs*), and for five years the mirror of my self. Then for a year I looked at what was common between these two. When a cincture became visible around my waist (*wasaṭ*) I tried for twelve years to cut it (*qaṭa'a*). Then I looked and saw a cincture in my belly (*fī baṭnī*), so I tried for five years to cut it and it was revealed to me how I could do this. Then I looked at the people (*khalq*) and I saw them as dead, so I said 'God is great' four times over them.[19]

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[17]. op. cit., Badawī, p. 90.
[18]. op. cit., 'Attār, p. 174; op. cit., Losensky, p. 233.
[19]. op. cit., Badawī, p. 97.

This rather enigmatic saying has Bāyazīd deal with his personal struggles for a total of thirty five years. The 'cincture in my belly' may refer to the very physical nature of his ascesis, and one of the loci of the *nafs*. The same tradition is amplified and adorned by 'Aṭṭār, making the text some three to four times longer and with much more detail. The following is just the first part: It is related that Bāyazīd said: "For twelve years, I was the blacksmith of myself. I put it in the furnace of asceticism and heated it with the fire of austerity. I placed it on the anvil of scorn and pounded it with the hammer of reproach, until I made a mirror of myself…."[20] It is significant that 'Aṭṭār picks up the 'blacksmith' reference and embellishes this, with images of fire, furnace, anvil, and corresponding moral struggles. It is almost as though he was amplifying the Zoroastrian implications as he fleshes out the bare bones of Sahlagī's text.

Another shorter tradition found in 'Aṭṭār's 'Memorial' is the following: It is related that Bāyazīd said: "I untied seventy sashes from my waist but one remained. No matter how hard I tried I could not untie it. I cried out in anguish: 'O God! Give me the strength to undo this one as well.' A voice replied: 'You have removed all these but this last one is not yours to undo.' "[21] The question here is the significance of the number seventy. It may allude to the seventy two Muslim sects, or even be a combination of the numbers thirty and forty, both important signifiers in religious number symbolism, as well as in the specific traditions referring to Bāyazīd. It may even be an allusion to the sacred tradition about the seventy thousand veils of light and darkness which separate humans from God. However, the more likely, if more mundane, reference here is to Bāyazīd's age. It is reported that he died at about the age of seventy three, and if this is so, then this is an anecdote from his older years, alluding to his lifelong struggle to remove the signs of unbelief from his conscience.

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[20]. op. cit., 'Attār, p. 142; op. cit., Losensky, p. 193.

[21]. op. cit., 'Attār, p. 162; op. cit., Losensky, p. 217.

Near the end of the chapter on Bāyazīd in the 'Memorial' there is a section dealing with the last days of the Shaykh and his approaching death. Unsurprisingly with 'Aṭṭār, there are several twists in the narrative:

> Bāyazīd found nearness (*qurb*) to the presence of Majesty (*ḥaḍrat-i 'izzat*) seventy times. Every time he returned he would tie on the cincture and then cut it (*bi-burīdī*) again. When his life was coming to an end he entered the prayer niche, bound on the cincture and put his fur coat on inside out and his hat on upside down.[22]

Regarding himself as a Zoroastrian needing repentance and praying with his garb askew, he launches into a long prayer of contrition in which he downplays his ascetic feats and pious obligations as being worthless before God:

> All this is nothing; think of it this way: it is nought. I am a seventy year old Turkoman (*turkmānī*) and my hair has become white in unbelief (*gabrī*). I am just now arriving from the desert, calling to my idol 'Tangari! Tangari'! Now I am learning to say 'God! God!' Now I am severing my cincture, now placing my foot within the orbit of

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[22]. op. cit., 'Attār, p. 180; op. cit., Losensky, p. 241.

> Islam, now my tongue utters the formal profession of faith….. [23]

This is a most remarkable cry from the heart of an acknowledged holy man at the end of his life. In ʻAṭṭār's eyes his scrupulous acts of devotion and claims of intimacy with God count for nothing. Instead, he is portrayed as a rough unbelieving desert dweller newly approaching the realm of true faith, abandoning his idol, learning to speak for the first time.

ʻAṭṭār further expands on this theme in his didactic poetic work known as the 'Divine Book' or 'Book of God'. This dual-rhymed (*mathnawī*) work is constructed with a 'frame' story about a king who counsels his six sons to seek spiritual rather than earthly treasures. Each short speech by the king or his sons is followed by illustrative stories and anecdotes, often taken from the lives of the Sufi masters. The last mention of Bāyazīd in the 'Divine Book' comes in the epilogue, one of the concluding stories in the book. On his deathbed he asks his followers and attendants for a cincture to be bound around his waist. Perplexed by this bizarre request, his followers try to dissuade him, but he is adamant and they finally relent and fetch a *zunnār*. When it is bound on, Bāyazīd begins to weep, smears his face with dust and laments with a sore heart. Weeping tears of blood, he cuts the cincture from his waist and prays to God:

Since I have cut the bond this moment, then consider me to have been a Zoroastrian (*gabr*) for seventy years;
Would not a Zoroastrian who repented at such a moment come to a knowledge of mysteries (*rāz*) by a single act of Your grace?

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[23]. ibid.

I am that Zoroastrian who has repented this moment: though I have been tardy, yet have I turned back. So saying, he renewed his confession of faith and gave voice to endless lamentations.[24]

This poignant story shows the restlessness and uncertainty of Bāyazīd's faith. In 'Aṭṭār's eyes he considers himself an unbeliever right up to the end of his life despite his scrupulous piety. He identifies as a Zoroastrian who converts to Islam on his deathbed and still hungers for that 'knowledge of mysteries by a single act of your grace'. He is so uncertain of his position before God that he imagines he is still an unbeliever who renews his confession of faith, turning as if for the first time to Islam.

CONCLUSION

There are significant differences between the narratives in Sahlagī and 'Aṭṭār; the former is more matter of fact while the later Persian author adds much more colour and detail, ascribing doubts, anxiety and heart searching to Bāyazīd. Yet the basics of his connection to Zoroastrians is still clear in the 11th century account of Sahlagī: for example his unbelieving neighbours address him with a religiously blended name 'Īsā ibn Surūshān.[25]

That he deemed himself an unbeliever, unsure of his standing before God, and unworthy of being called a Muslim is clear from his preoccupation with the *zunnār* as a symbol of his infidelity. This is coupled with the metaphor of taking years of austerities and devotion to remove it from his waist. But the question arises as to whether he was ashamed of his family's former association with the ancient Iranian faith, and thus sought to overcompensate for this connection. There is also some evidence that there were a number of Zoroastrians in Basṭām for whom he felt empathy, and that they in turn regarded him as a model Muslim, a great Sufi Shaykh, a holy man to emulate and who motivated their conversion to Islam.

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[24]. Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār, *Ilāhī-nāma,* H. Ritter (ed.), Istanbul: Maṭba'a Ma'ārif, 1940, p. 379. J. A. Boyle (trans.), *The Ilāhī-nāma or Book of God of Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976, p. 346.

[25]. op. cit., Badawī, p. 92.

We also see in Bāyazīd the same spirit of compassion and inclusivity which prompted, for example, the Chishti brotherhood from the 13th and 14th centuries on, as they expanded their Order in the subcontinent and enabled non-Muslims to participate in their religious life of rituals, prayers, music, poetry and veneration of saints. Here Sufism later became *the* Islam, not only of rulers and the educated but of ordinary often unlettered people, rural and urban alike.[26]

Bāyazīd's paradoxical connection with Zoroastrians was a vital part of his character in both the earlier and later sources for his life. It was part of his scrupulous questioning of his conscience (*zuhd*), his relationship with God, and also shows his great humility as a Sufi friend. His legacy still inspires seekers on the path, of those searching for truer meaning, intimacy with the divine, and a more inclusive relationship with fellow humans.

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[26]. Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, chapters 2 and 3.

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