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THE CROSS AND THE WOMEN OF GALILEE:  
A FEMINIST THEOLOGY OF SALVATION

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Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.  
— Matt 27:55 (NRSV)

*Introduction*

The Christian faith was born in a time and place where people were crucified by the thousands. Jesus of Nazareth was one of them. In one sense, his cross was no different than all those other crosses and his suffering was no different than the suffering of any other crucified person. But, for centuries, Christianity has set his cross apart, claiming that Jesus was not only a human being but God incarnate and that the nature and purpose of his suffering was unique, either as a vicarious atonement for human sin made possible by one perfect sacrifice, as an extraordinary moral example of love and obedience to God, or as a cosmic victory over suffering and death. All of these ways of thinking about the cross—the classical atonement theories—have rich and meaningful histories and clearly speak to the nature of the faith. That is why they have been around for so long. But they also have their limitations. In each of these theories, the cross of Jesus of Nazareth, and what Jesus suffered there, seems disconnected from the many crosses of history where others have suffered, and continue to suffer, from the injustices in this world.

The particular social location of Jesus of Nazareth, an oppressed Jew living under Roman domination, is not part of any of these theologies. His cross is unrelated to the social and politi-

cal reality of crucifixion, his suffering is different from the suffering of other crucified people, and the hope of his resurrection is for souls in eternity but not for bodies in this world. And yet, as evangelical Christians, we affirm a specifically *bodily* resurrection, not an abstraction. That means Jesus' cross, while unique, must also be connected to the many other crosses of history and his resurrection must be connected, not only to a hope for souls in the afterlife, but for bodies in this life as well.

Liberation theologians have made some inroads into making these theological connections. They insist that Jesus' identity as an impoverished and oppressed person, a Galilean Jew in the Roman Empire and subject to the punishment of crucifixion, is not only socially and historically important, but theologically significant as well. For them, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus signifies God's solidarity with the oppressed people of the world. The cross of Jesus of Nazareth is connected with the other crosses of that time and in his resurrection is the hope of a coming reign of God breaking into this world in concrete social, political, and economic terms. This is a significantly different point of view from that of earlier atonement theories, one which speaks to many people for whom the problem of the non-person in society and the salvation of bodies in this world is at least as important as the other-worldly, individual salvation of the soul. But it also has some limitations.

Even when the cross of Jesus is united with the crosses of history, and through it, God is understood to be in solidarity with oppressed people, the idea that we are saved solely by suffering is not experienced as good news by everybody. For example, victims of intimate violence often struggle to learn the lesson that love doesn't hurt. How does that square with the idea that the love of God is proved through the suffering of Christ? Is there another way of telling the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus that moves us beyond the limitations of a theology of redemptive suffering toward another way of thinking about the cross? I think that part of the answer can be found in the story of the lamentation and protest of the women of Galilee.

These women are depicted in all the Gospels as present at the crucifixion of Jesus and as the first to witness and proclaim his

resurrection. While others in the Gospel stories, including most of the male disciples, move away from the cross, the women move toward it. These women act much like many women I have encountered as a police officer on the streets of New York who, at the scene of a shooting or another violent death, are often the first to want to cross police lines to minister to the body, to grieve, to cry out in deep protest, to refuse to “let another one be lost to the streets,” and who act to make that so.

Viewed through the eyes of the women of Galilee, the cross and resurrection of Jesus are not primarily a moment for atonement through valorized suffering, or a call to exemplary obedience, a tale of a singularly heroic and victorious male savior, or a call to inappropriate self-abnegation. They reflect a tale of shared trauma and grief over an event that, like all crucifixions, should never have happened and a “seeing of the Lord” that began in this community of women as they witnessed the power of God’s love to literally raise the dead.

The story of the cross and the women of Galilee is the story of anyone who has encountered God’s grace and resurrecting power in the midst of brutality and death. By including these women in our own understanding of the nature of Jesus’ death and resurrection, we can come to see the cross, not only as a saving death or heroic sacrifice, but also as a place of lament and protest that opens our eyes to the power of bodily resurrection in our lives and in our communities as well. To understand this better, it is important to consider some of the historical context in which the Galilean women who first followed Jesus were living and some of the traditions that prevailed there.

*Mourning Rituals in the First Century Jewish  
and Greco-Roman World*

Rituals of mourning were widespread in antiquity throughout the Greco-Roman and the Jewish world, and women were the primary participants. Their purpose was to affirm the worth of the life that was lost. Since having one’s death go unmourned was thought of as a great disgrace, these rituals served to affirm the dignity of human life, often in the midst of brutal circumstances.

In the case of people killed by the state, rituals of lament could actually serve as a form of protest against execution. As Kathleen Corley puts it, “the powerful potential of funerals for complaint and protest through the mourning of women and kin is no doubt one reason why criminals and traitors were usually denied burial rites and mourning and their bodies either dumped into mass graves or simply left to rot unburied outside of city walls.”<sup>1</sup>

In reference to the relationship between mourning and crucifixion, Corely writes,

[E]xecutions were intended to provide a public display of Roman force to serve as a deterrent to dissent, and the proceedings were hardly intended to facilitate public mourning and normal burial practices. In view of the inherent potential for disruption posed by women’s emotional lamentation of the dead this is not surprising.<sup>2</sup>

In fact, mourning was prohibited at crucifixions as evidenced in the *Gospel of Peter* 12:1–5 “although on the day the master was crucified we could not mourn or beat our breasts, now let us perform these rites at his tomb.”

In other words, the lamentation of women served to disrupt the normalized violence of crucifixion and served as a protest against the oppression of the Roman Empire. Whereas the oppressors did everything they could to get the message across that those they crucified were nobodies, those who loved them, particularly the women, did everything they could to affirm their humanity. In this way, women from oppressed communities, such as that surrounding Jesus, engaged in a profound resistance to the dehumanizing violence of their oppressors, and refused to let the Roman Empire define the worth, value, and humanity of their people.

In addition to this tension between the officials of the Roman Empire and the relatives and loved ones of those they executed, there was also another gender-based tension. In the highly patriarchal context of the first century Jewish and Greco-Roman

1. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus*, 110–11.
2. *Ibid.*, 118.

world, there was an enormous difference between the way women and men typically responded to death. Whereas women frequently grieved and lamented death and openly displayed their emotion, men praised the deceased and restrained all outward signs of feeling. This was done in the tradition of the *epitaphios logos* or funeral oration, in which praise, not mourning, served to valorize the lives of the dead, particularly in the case of men who died on behalf of the state.<sup>3</sup> These different reactions, conditioned by different gender roles, were not equally valued. As is usually the case in patriarchal society, the “men’s way” of doing things was more highly valued and the “women’s way” was denigrated. As Corley puts it,

Women’s mourning which focused on the pain of the loss and the continued connection with the loved one, became negatively coded, whereas male praise of the dead took on positive value. Male grief was characterized by restraint and praise for the dead, whereas women’s mourning was considered ‘uncontrolled’ and ‘unmanly’ in spite of the apparent orderliness of their religious rites.<sup>4</sup>

I argue that though it is devalued, this “uncontrolled” and “unmanly” mourning in the face of unjust and violent death, exemplified by the story of the women of Galilee, is an important part of the way the early disciples came to understand the death and resurrection of Jesus.

#### *Galilean Women and the Jesus Movement*

Galilee lay on the fringe of the Roman Empire. Since the sixth century BCE, it had been under the control of various foreign empires (Babylonian, Persian, Greco-Egyptian, Greco-Syrian, and Roman) and was currently ruled by Antipas, the son of Herod the Great. Historical and archeological evidence points toward Roman oppression of Galilee in several ways: (1) Roman imperial policy was an affront to the values of traditional Jewish religion,<sup>5</sup> (2) the commercialization and urbanization of Galilee,

3. Ibid., 110.

4. Ibid.

5. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 176.

made manifest in the building and rebuilding of Galilean cities for the benefit of the Roman Empire, led to an increase in the social and economic exploitation of Jewish peasants whose goods, labor, and taxes all went to support these projects,<sup>6</sup> and (3) the dominance of imperial Rome was maintained by violence, including crucifixions,<sup>7</sup> creating ongoing trauma in these communities.

Antipas rebuilt Sepphoris in 4 BCE<sup>8</sup> and founded the city of Tiberius in 19 CE, thus creating two major urban centers in Galilee. Far from contributing to people's well being, this building and rebuilding of cities by the Romans contributed to an increase in social inequality and an oppressive social and economic dynamic that was unfavorable to the Jewish peasants of the region who were forced to support these cities with their labor, their goods, and their taxes. Not only was land, which traditional Jewish religion viewed as belonging only to God, treated as an "entrepreneurial commodity" by the Romans, development also happened in a way that destroyed the livelihood of the Jewish people.<sup>9</sup> This social and economic oppression was, of course, maintained by the presence of raw power and military force<sup>10</sup> including frequent and public crucifixions as a means of bringing conquered people and rebellious provinces under control.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the traditional Jewish method of exposure mentioned in Deuteronomy, in which a person was "hung on a tree" after death as a public warning and removed by sunset, Roman crucifixion was particularly brutal, as well as humiliating to Jewish people, in that the victim was crucified alive and, most often, denied burial.<sup>12</sup> In that way, this practice served as an affront to the Jewish belief in the righteousness of God and

6. Ibid., 218–23.

7. Ibid., 543.

8. Reed, *Guide to the New Testament*, 54. No archeological evidence of damage at Sepphoris has been found. Therefore, New Testament scholarship is not united in this opinion, which is based on Josephus.

9. Ibid., 209.

10. Ibid., 231.

11. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 46–47.

12. Ibid., 542.

social justice. It also served as a profound insult to their sense of human dignity.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to the social, economic, and political oppression of the Galilean people, there was also the reality of poverty, hunger, and disease. As was the case throughout the ancient world, both life and health in this region were fragile. The life expectancy was roughly twenty years, even lower for women who often died in childbirth.<sup>14</sup> As Reed puts it, “Life and health was, in Galilee and the whole ancient world, much more fragile than it is today. . . . About every fourth birth resulted in a death, either of the mother or the child.”<sup>15</sup>

This type of multi-layered oppression, quite understandably, engendered resistance and rebellion. In fact, although Galilee had been under foreign domination long before the dawn of the Roman Empire, there was much more resistance to the Romans than to any other oppressors. As Crossan puts it, “Within the first four hundred years of foreign control, under the Persian Empire and its Greek replacements, there was only a single revolt, at the very end of that period. But within the first two hundred years of Roman control there were three major revolts . . .”<sup>16</sup> As Richard Horsley puts it, “the Judeans and Galileans were perhaps the most adamant in reasserting their independence and defending their traditional way of life, persisting in their resistance for nearly two centuries before the Roman armies ‘pacified’ Palestine more permanently.”<sup>17</sup>

These resistance movements took various forms, some overtly rebellious and others more subtle, offering a way for the people to hope for something other than the poverty, violence, and oppression they experienced in their lives. It was into this context that Jesus was born. No doubt there were many reasons why Galileans would be attracted to Jesus, the healer who spoke of another way of life—a countercultural kingdom God. But why

13. Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 87–88.

14. Reed, *Visual Guide*, 68.

15. *Ibid.*, 69.

16. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity*, 177.

17. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 35.

would Galilean women be attracted to the movement? Perhaps it was, as Tal Ilan suggests, because “the power and authority Jesus claimed for himself derived not from the main bodies of power of his time . . . but rather from the charismatic fringes,”<sup>18</sup> those activities such as healing and prophecy that typically happened outside the usual institutions of authority such as the temple or the priesthood. According to Ilan,

[W]omen could and did emerge from these fringes in similar capacities. Jesus is thus to be found in typical feminine settings and accused of typical feminine transgressions. His message, even when not entirely feminist in character, would be understood by women because he spoke in a familiar language and went through familiar motions.<sup>19</sup>

Elaine M. Wainwright makes a similar argument, claiming that healing was an essential connection between Jesus and women, one that united them in a nonhierarchical way. She writes, “The healer and the healed cannot be isolated from one another nor constructed hierarchically within the symbolic universe of early Christianity.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Jesus’ healing ministry created a community in which women were included and treated as equals. Unfortunately, other than the fact that there *were* women in this movement, as evidenced by ample scriptural references to their presence,<sup>21</sup> and speculation such as that cited above concerning the reasons why Galilean women would have been attracted to Jesus, not much is known about them as individuals. Only a few women are named in the Gospels, about whom little else is known. Many more go unnamed. The only exception to this is Mary Magdalene.

### *Mary Magdalene*

18. Ilan, “Footsteps of Jesus,” 117.

19. *Ibid.*, 135.

20. Wainwright, “Your Faith,” 243.

21. See the list of women in Luke 8:1–3; the depiction of women as present at the cross in Mark 15:40–41; and in the “Empty tomb narratives” found in Matthew 27, Mark 16, Luke 24, and John 20 as well as numerous stories in the Gospels in which women were the recipients of Jesus’ healing.



Very little is known even about Mary Magdalene as a historic figure. Her name suggests that she came from the city known in Aramaic as Magdala or Magadan (Migdal in Hebrew, which means “tower”) a small city located by the Sea of Galilee by the base of Mount Arbel, noted for its trade in salted fish. According to the Gospels of Mark and Luke, Mary was delivered by Jesus from seven demons.<sup>22</sup> There are different ways of thinking about this exorcism. For example, Bruce Chilton sees it is a symbolic way of saying she was particularly liberated of evil and “uncleanness.”<sup>23</sup> Corley, on the other hand, claims these exorcisms may be a reference to the way in which women who spent much time in tombs as part of their ritual lamentation were thought sometimes to be possessed by demons.<sup>24</sup> Either way, Mary is heavily associated with the healing ritual of exorcism, as well as lamentation, particularly in reference to the death of Jesus.

Although she is not mentioned in any of Paul’s letters, in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John, Mary Magdalene is depicted as the first to witness the risen Christ. While in these Gospels the male disciples are portrayed as having betrayed Jesus (Judas), denied Jesus (Peter) or simply hiding out in fear (the other disciples), she and the other women of Galilee are variously depicted as present at the crucifixion and as rising on the third day to minister to Jesus’ crucified body. Although the entire process of crucifixion was designed by the Romans to dehumanize victims like Jesus and convince others of the worthlessness of their lives, these women, led by Mary Magdalene, were determined to affirm Jesus’ dignity and the value of his life and ministry.

Mary’s testimony, “I have seen the Lord”<sup>25</sup> (arguably the first Christian sermon!) still inspires people today, who are faced with dehumanizing violence and oppression and who long to know that God really did raise Jesus from the dead and there is, therefore, hope for us all. For example, consider Barbara Reid’s

22. Mark 16:9; Luke 8:2.

23. Chilton *Mary Magdalene*, 25–28.

24. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus*, 34.

25. John 20:18.

experience in Peru, where women who had endured the loss of family members to the “Shining Path” movement turned to Mary Magdalene’s story for courage and inspiration. Some of their words are as follows:

When I lived in the selva, I was always silent when I saw injustices; now I have changed. I have become strong. If I see something that is wrong I speak out the truth about it. Like Mary Magdalene who turns around when she experienced the risen Christ, I have turned around. It’s not easy to change and leave behind what was before.  
— Gloria<sup>26</sup>

How can we follow Mary Magdalene’s example and preach the good news? We have to throw off the old garments of anything that holds women back. And when you are on this mission, it feeds you and you learn. You speak differently, as you gain courage to go about preaching.  
— Adriana<sup>27</sup>

### *What Is Resurrection?*

But what exactly did Mary Magdalene and the other women of Galilee see and experience that gave them the courage to “go about preaching?” We are living in a time when nearly two millennia of Christian experience are behind us, during which we have given great consideration and engaged in no small amount of debate about the nature of the resurrection and what it means. This was not the case in the first century. There was no formal theology of the cross and resurrection, only strange encounters with the risen Lord that, even now, are hard to fully understand based upon human reason and logic.

Following the death of Jesus, his community was traumatized. Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza tells us that:

The early attempts of meaning-making in the face of the devastating execution of Jesus should not be conceptualized merely in terms of the history of ideas. Nor should they be understood primarily as

26. Reid, *Taking up the Cross*, 113.

27. *Ibid.*, 115.

responses to and affirmations of Jesus' resurrection. Rather, we must read these early Christian attempts of theological meaning-making as critical arguments that begin with the very real experience of Jesus' dehumanization and crucifixion as a political criminal.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, long before there was a Christian experience or theology of resurrection (let alone a sense of Christian triumphalism) there was an oppressed community traumatized by yet another brutal death. As was usually the case in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world, it was likely that the male disciples responded to this death by eulogizing Jesus as a hero who died nobly while the female disciples responded with mourning rituals that emphasized the pain of loss. Both of these responses to violent and de-humanizing death are present in the Gospels.

On the surface, the Gospels tend to valorize the male response to the death of Jesus over that of women. Even while adopting the funerary traditions and mourning rituals of women as a source, the presumably male Gospel writers tended to use these stories in service of narratives that stressed heroic death and noble sacrifice, not lamentation or loss. Nevertheless, if we read against the grain, the voices of women are still present, perhaps because they were simply too strong to silence entirely. These voices speak of grief and pain. They are the voices of lament, not eulogy.

In their story, the body matters. Resurrection is not a disembodied "spiritual" event unrelated to concrete human need in the here and now. The resurrected Jesus is described in the Gospels as embodied. He has flesh and blood and physical wounds,<sup>29</sup> and he eats fish for breakfast.<sup>30</sup> But there is something about the nature of his bodily presence that still speaks to mystery and transcendence. He walks through locked doors<sup>31</sup> and is only recognized by believers (even then with difficulty). In fact, at first, the testimony of the Galilean women

28. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus*, 120.

29. Luke 24:39.

30. Luke 24:42; John 21:12–13.

31. John 20:19, 26.

is not even believed by Jesus' own followers.<sup>32</sup> In short, the resurrection is not simply resuscitation, like that of Lazarus. It is both objective and subjective. That is, it is both embodied and recognizable and, at the same time, something mysterious and transcendent that can only be seen through the eyes of faith. According to the Gospel accounts, it also seems that the ability to "see the Lord" is, in great part, about the nature of the relationship people have with God and one another.

That is where the story of the Galilean women is useful. They encounter Jesus while in the midst of lament and protest, stemming from their great love for him, for one another and for their oppressed community. There is a connection between such lament and protest and the ability to see the risen Christ. As Marianne Sawicki puts it,

The women at the tomb were observing the customs of mourning. They were weeping for Jesus. Their eyes were full of tears when the realization hit them that Jesus was not in the grave. For the poor, for widows, for a colonized nation, the eyes are the organs that register pain . . . They "saw" Jesus through their tears . . . Sixty years afterwards the churches had four sanitized little stories about a trip to a garden and a lovely surprise. But it wasn't like that when it happened. Grief may also be a precondition for resurrection, and tears for permitting the eyes to see.<sup>33</sup>

The women of Galilee "saw the Lord" and so can we. Just as Jesus was present to them, Jesus can also be present to us, as we are present to one another and as we struggle for justice and love in our world. Part of what it means to be present to one another involves shared lamentation. Mourning rituals are essential to the life of a community, creating a sense of continuity and ongoing connection between the living and the dead. Funerary rituals, particularly those involving meals shared with the dead, in which their presence is invoked and celebrated, were very important to the early Christian community as one way of coping with the ongoing trauma of violent death. As Corley puts it:

32. Mark 16:13.

33. Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 92–93.

These funerary rituals are what create community, by solidifying the relationship between the living members of the community, and by connecting them with the deceased of the community. There is connection, there is presence, both of the living and the dead. We will see that it is women who were the primary actors in these funerary rituals and meals which were so important to the communal lives of the earliest Christian groups, and therefore it is the women who generated the central elements that created the Christian community: memorial meals for the dead Jesus, the Passion narrative which memorialized Jesus' death in narrative form, as was the notion that the dead Jesus was "raised and appeared" in the midst of the community in their memorial meals and rituals through the lament of ancient Christian women.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, Corey thinks that both what she terms the "Eucharist," as well as the Passion narratives, including the Empty Tomb stories, began, not as a tradition of noble death or heroic sacrifice, but as woman-led funerary rituals, quite common in the larger Jewish and Greco-Roman world, in which, in the midst of mourning, the ongoing presence of the dead is experienced and affirmed.

Reflecting on their own pastoral experience of healing, Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker tell us that "held in the embrace of a community's rituals and traditions, grief can find its depth, anger can voice its anguish and protest can fuel creative action that holds out the possibilities of restored and protected life even in the midst or the aftermath of injustice and tragedy."<sup>35</sup> That is my vision for the church today, a place where life can be affirmed and protected, even in the midst of a violent world. That is where the impact and significance of Jesus' resurrection can be mostly deeply felt.

Not long before her own death, Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmet Till, who was lynched at the age of 14, said,

[M]y story is more than a story of a lynching. It is more than a story of how, with God's guidance, I made a commitment to rip the covers off Mississippi, USA—revealing to the world the horrible face of

34. Corley, *Maranatha*, 17.

35. Brock and Parker, *Saving Paradise*, 407.

race hatred . . . It is the story of how I was able to pull myself back from the brink of desolation and turn my life around by digging deep within my soul to pull hope from despair, joy from anguish, forgiveness from anger, love from hate.<sup>36</sup>

This is what resurrection looks like, the ongoing reality of life renewed and restored despite everything that opposes it. This is where the cross of Jesus of Nazareth intersects with the crosses of history and brings us new hope, not only for souls for eternity, but for bodies here in this world. Because Jesus was raised bodily from the dead, we can experience renewed life, not only “there and then” in eternity but “here and now” as part of our embodied, earthly lives.

There are three ways in which this renewed life may happen. First, it can happen as the bodily salvation of those whose lives are spared by creative protest against violence. This was seen in the anti-lynching movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century as well as the ongoing protests against police brutality, street violence, and intimate violence that continue today. By disrupting, lamenting, and protesting such violence, those who act help spare more people from similar needless suffering. Unlike theologies of the cross that focus only on the individual salvation of the soul in eternity, what I am proposing includes the collective salvation of bodies in this world as well as an important dimension of the renewed life of resurrection.

Second, there is the resurrection of life’s purpose. Those who grieve lives lost to violence can at least feel like their loved ones have “not died in vain.” Although their involuntary suffering and death was not redemptive, something good can still come out of the situation. Families and loved ones of murder victims, and all who care about them, need this kind of resurrection. In fact this determination not to let a loved one “die in vain” often gives rise to action in the world that saves bodies as well, uniting this second dimension of resurrection with the first. People who grieve more “ordinary” loss need this resurrection of purpose, for even the powerful and privileged die, sometimes quite horribly. Their loved ones need space to mourn as well. There are many

36. Till-Mobley and Bensen, *Death of Innocence*, xxiii.

crosses in the world and many forms of resurrection. Because Jesus died as a victim of crucifixion, a theology of the cross must begin with that type of suffering and death as a starting point. But it does not end there. By turning away from theologies of the cross that normalize or justify violence and move toward lamentation and protest of unjust suffering and death, we find that there is a place at the cross for mourning other forms of loss as well.

Finally, resurrection is the healing that happens in the lives of bereaved people when the depths of grief—what Till-Mobley describes as the “deep digging in my soul”—give way to hope, joy, forgiveness, and love. It is the affirmation of life against all odds, of which Kadiatou Diallo speaks when she says, “if there is anything as cruel as the taking of a man’s life, it is the taking away of his story, the particulars that make him holy. The mother who dreams that she can undo any harm that comes to her child, dreams fruitlessly. The one last thing she can do is to try to give her child back his story, the greatest and least obligation she can fulfill.”<sup>37</sup> In the redemptive lamentation and protest of the women of Galilee there is this deep digging in the soul, giving way to an experience of resurrection that is the beginning of the hope of God’s eternal life.

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37. Diallo and Wolf, *My Heart Will Cross This Ocean*, v.

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