

The Plutarch's Motive of *Descensus Animae* in *Nag Hammadi* and the *Corpus Hermeticum*

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Recibido: 10-11-2015

Aceptado: 08-12-2015

RESUMEN

Al evaluar los contactos de Plutarco con otras culturas contemporáneas, los investigadores todavía no han llegado a un consenso acerca de la relación entre el queronense y la literatura cristiano-primitiva. Un buen ejemplo de esto aparece al atender al motivo de la creación del alma humana. La intención de las próximas páginas es, tras un análisis de los textos plutarqueos, atender a estos posibles contactos con NHC, los heresiólogos y el *Corpus Hermeticum* a fin de dilucidar sus similitudes y diferencias.

Palabras clave: Plutarco, platonismo, literatura cristiano-primitiva, gnosticismo, NHC, *CH*, nacimiento del alma, antropología, cosmología.

ABSTRACT

In evaluating Plutarch's contacts with other cultures of his era, scholars have not reached consensus so far regarding the relationship between the Chaironean and Early Christian writers. A good example of this lack of consensus rises when we come to the views of the creation of human soul. The aim of the following paper is to deal with those contacts by, after an analysis of Plutarch's texts, taking into an account the sources of NHC, heresiologists, and also the contemporary *Corpus Hermeticum* in order to highlight their similitudes and/or differences about the motif of the soul's birth.

Keywords: Plutarch, Platonism, Early Christian literature, Gnosticism, NHC, *CH*, Birth of the Soul, Anthropology, Cosmology.

One of the most enduring questions regarding the human being is, beyond all doubt, that of the existence of the human soul. Curiously, despite the technological revolution of the last century, the approaches to such an issue are still not too distant from those of Postclassical Greek literature —and consequently, neither are their conclusions. Indeed, while neuroscience currently proposes that the individual *ego* lies in a web of relationships between units in a net of neuronal connexions in the cerebral cortex¹, there

¹ See Fuster (2013).

is simultaneously no lack of voices relativizing scientific conceptions, such as that of Drew Leder in his *The Absent Body*². Leder, in his way, highlights how the human being is capable of forgetting his *inner body* when concentrating on the performance of an activity, like sport or study. Moreover, in Leder's view, the individual only takes into an account his material body when he is in a state deemed *dysfunctional*. Therefore, as result, the author resurrects the anthropological debate of the supreme soul vs. the alien, uncontrollable, obscure human body.

The situation in the second and third centuries of our era was not too different in this respect³, but it is still worth taking a look at the responses given then by pagan and early Christian literatures. In both cases, there is a distinct attempt to adapt theories of the existence of the soul to these cultures' own philosophical and religious patrons. Hence the aim of the following pages is to deal with one of these perpetual questions: How does the human soul come to be? Due to Plutarch's great interest in this issue⁴, we will examine his view – as evidenced mainly in *On the Sign of Socrates* (590b-592e), *The Slowness of the Divinity* (563f-568a), and also in *The Face on the Moon* (943a, 945b-c). In addition, we will focus on, though not limit ourselves to, its possible relationship with Gnostic literature, as preserved in the Nag Hammadi Corpus and the *Corpus Hermeticum*. This article is therefore organized according to the diverse steps that the human soul accomplishes in incarnation, tackling also the anthropological, ethical and cosmological implications in order to trace their similarities. The final section will draw the emerging conclusions.

At first sight, it is clear that the Plutarchean framework is essentially indebted to the Platonic one⁵, whose main features remain relatively uniform from one work to another. According to Plutarch's *De facie*, “in the composition of these three factors earth furnishes the body, the moon the soul, and the sun furnishes mind”⁶. Thus, he admittedly establishes the possibility of salvation for all souls, through their participation in the divine as individual *nous*⁷. The only difference between souls, in his view, is determined by the status of their *nous*, namely, whether it is sunk deep into the body or is preserved pure and separated from materiality⁸. The destiny of the former is rein-

² See Leder (1990).

³ For an overview of Christian literature see, for example, Bovon (2010: 387-406). Festugière (1990: 3-15).

⁴ Specifically, in the soul's creation, form, internal dichotomy, substance, origin, and destination, scholars such as Brenk (1998: 28-49), Betz (1975), Dillon (2009: 17-24), Roig Lanzillotta (2011: 401-417) or Van Kooten (2012: 215-233) have already devoted due attention to this matter. For a summary, see Hirsch-Luipold (2014: 171-175).

⁵ Regarding the differences, see Jones (1916: 58, n. 148); Aguilar Fernández (1981: 286).

⁶ Plu. *De facie* 943a, transl. Cherniss – Helmbold.

⁷ See Plu. *Quaest. Plat.* 1001c. One exception only can be made related to those dissolute souls condemned to oblivion, Brenk (1970: 22-23).

⁸ See Plu. *De genio Socr.* 591d-e. There are clear similarities here with the Socrates sketched by Plato (*Sym.* 174e-175b, 220c-d), as Aguilar Fernández points out (1981: 39-40, 152). However, there are evident inconsistencies when we compare this conception with those of Plu. *De facie* 943a, and *De virt. et vit.* 408f, in which it is explicitly stated that *nous* has nothing to do with the body. It also can be seen in the Plutarch's view of the world soul in Plutarch's *De an. procr.* 1026c-e (Aguilar Fernández [1981: 195-196]).

carnation, until they succeed in keeping passions under control⁹. As for the latter, they deserve either the reincarnation in special bodies, such as those of prophets or seers¹⁰, or the definitive transcendence in the sun.

1. THE DUTY OF INCARNATION

Let me now return to the beginning. The first question that the ancient author would probably have in mind is, why must the human soul abandon this perfect state, in which it is part of the creator? Plutarch did not deal with this question specifically in any essay, nor does his conception of it seem unitary. However, we can distinguish, on the one hand, a physical argument, based on the soul's inclination to matter due to its intrinsic terrene condition¹¹, and, on the other, as G. Ferrari stated¹², an ethical hypothesis, according to which the human soul, from the moment of its birth in the sun, is inoculated with feelings of guilt. Plutarch describes as it follows: "... arises a yearning and desire that draws the soul toward birth (γένεσις), so named as being an earthward (ἐπί γῆν) inclination (νεῦσις) of the soul"¹³. In any case, it is obvious that the soul is involuntarily expelled from its creator.

A problem like this one, suitable for theories dependent on Platonic dualism, is also echoed in the Gnostic authors of the second and third centuries¹⁴, the adduced causes being varied and including positives as well as negatives. As far as the positive are concerned, for instance, the school of Taurus, following the *Timaeus* 41b 7, proposed that souls should descend in order to manage the material world¹⁵. Plutarch's option, meanwhile, even if it is also traced back to other Platonic foundations¹⁶, nonetheless bears similarities to those of other authors, who explained the *descensus animae* as an event due to an original fall of the human soul. A good example of these theories can be encountered in *The Tripartite Tractate*: "As for the material substance, its way is different and in many forms, and it was a weakness which existed in many types of inclination"¹⁷.

⁹ See Plu. *De genio Socr.* 593d; *De facie* 943d, 945b; *De sera num.* 565b, 565c-d. Regarding the relationship of the pureness of these souls and their movement, see Plu. *De sera num.* 564a; also Pl. *Phdr.* 247b.

¹⁰ As it is the example of Hermodorus of Clazomenas, Plu. *De genio Socr.* 592c. This assertion is no doubt related to that of *De facie* 944d-e. See also Cherniss (²1968: 211 n. f). Regarding this division in NHC, see *Trip.Trac.* (NHC I 5) 118,30-119,10.

¹¹ See Alt (1983: 21-23).

¹² See Ferrari (1988: 135). Celsus agrees in Origenes, *Cels.* VIII 53.

¹³ Plu. *De sera* 566a, transl. De Lacy – Einarson; *De genio Socr.* 590e-f.

¹⁴ As well as Plotin and Iamblicus. See Festugière (1990: 69-72).

¹⁵ In the same way, *C.H.* IV 2 (49.10) and *Ascl.* 10 (308.13). See also Festugière (1990: 72-74).

¹⁶ Pl. *Phdr.* 246b-d, 249a. See also Festugière (1990: 78-79).

¹⁷ *Trip.Trac.* (NHC I 5) 106, 10, transl. Attridge – Mueller. As well as in *Zost.* (NHC VIII 1) 1, 20; *Macr. In somm. Scip.* II.11; *Kore kosmou* 35, 3-4; *Plot.* IV 8, 5.16; ἀμαρτία in *Iamb. Protr.* 380.9-12. See also Jonas (2000: 97, 186).

2. INSEMINATION IN THE MOON

Almost unanimously, Plutarch's works begin the process of incarnation with the insemination of solar *nous* in the moon¹⁸: “the substance of the soul is left upon the moon (λείπεται δ' ἡ τῆς ψυχῆς φύσις ἐπὶ τῆς σελήνης) and retains certain vestiges and dreams of life as it were”¹⁹. With the exception of these “vestiges and dreams” of a previous life, as F. Brenk correctly notes, Plutarch does not mention any previous vision of Platonic Forms²⁰. Instead, the Chaeronean seems to resolve the problem through the idea of *homoiosis theo*: this states that the soul's creator must be an ethical model to his own creation, imposing upon the soul the requirement to guard these values as a *conditio sine qua non* for definitive reunion after death²¹, or just for letting the soul partake of the creator's nature²². What is certain is that the descent of the *nous* to the moon marks the beginning of life for the human soul, as well as the beginning of the influence of *heimarmene*²³.

Just as in Plutarch, we read, mainly (though not exclusively) in gnostic sources, that the conception of God as a luminous creator of souls through his seed is widely attested²⁴, as in *On the Origin of the World*²⁵: “Cast his seed upon the midst of the navel of the earth [...] his body being indeed like their body, but his appearance like the man (of light) who had shown himself to them”. In this sense, God not only creates the personal *nous* of the individual, but also uses the *homoiosis theo* in order to render him partaker of his divine nature²⁶. Likewise, in the first of *The Three Steles of Seth*, the soul's dependence from its creator is described in the same terms: “And thou

¹⁸ See Pl. *Ti.* 41e-42d. Regarding its relationship with Plutarch's works, consult Cherniss (1968: 219 n. f); Elkaisy-Friemuth – Dillon (2009: 2-3).

¹⁹ Plutarch in *De facie* 944f and 945c (transl. Cherniss – Helmbold) —see also *De E* 393d and *De genio Socr.* 591b-c—, resembles the insemination located by Plato's *Timaeus* 41-42 on the stars. The sun is called Atropos in *De facie* and *the invisible* in *De genio Socr.* The source for *De facie* and *De genio Socr.* should be *Laws* 960c, but, due to the order of *De fato*, namely, Clotho, Atropo, and Laquesis, the source of the latter should be *R.* 617c; see Cherniss (1968: 221 n. b). See also Festugière (1990: 15-16).

²⁰ See Brenk (1998: 42 n. 41). It is always a pleasant experience in Plato's view, *Phaidr.* 248c-e, 250b; *R.* 614d-615a; *Ti.* 41e.

²¹ See Plu. *De sera* 550D; *De genio Socr.* 591b.

²² See Plu. *Quaest. Plat.* 1001C. See also Pl. *Ti.* 736b 38; “analogous to that element of which the stars are made” (Brenk [1998: 41 and n. 39]).

²³ See Pl. *Phaidr.* 247-250. See also, Elkaisy-Friemuth – Dillon (2009: 4); Brenk (1998: 39-40); Jonas (2000: 185). However, there is in Plutarch no process by which the stars endow souls with qualities as presents before birth, but this may be based on the way in which Plutarch conceives of souls on the moon as already “mixed and intermediate things” in this state, Plu. *De facie* 945d.

²⁴ See *Ap. John* (NHC II 1) 31, *BG* 19, 36; *HipArc* (NHC II 4) 96, 20. Also the Christian authors of Late Antiquity, as Aeneas of Gaza, *Thphr.* p. 39, II. 20-25. See also Krausmüller (2009: 56); about the caveat for Christians in accepting the notion of a pre-existential soul at 63.

²⁵ See NHC II 5, 114 (162), transl. Bethge – Layton.

²⁶ See *CH*, I 12-15; *Trip. Trac.* (NHC I 5) I, 105, 20-30; *Ap. John* (NHC II 1) 14, 20-30; 15, 10-20; 19, 20-30; *ParaphShem* (NHC VII 1) 24.15-30; *TeachSilv* (NHC VII, 4) 92.23-26; *Ap. John* (NHC II 1) 6, 10-30. See also Festugière (1990: 28). About the implications of the idea of redemption, see Rudolph (1984: 94-95). On the reception of this topic in Late Antiquity, see Krausmüller (2009: 59-60).

art my mind, O my Father. And I, I sowed and begot [...] Thou art light, since thou beholdest light. Thou hast revealed light"²⁷.

Here again, as in Plutarch's works, there is an intermediate place, generally feminine —Sophia, Mother, Ogdoad— which souls must go through in their descent and ascension²⁸. This intermediate place between sun and earth, also known as moon, can be found in *On the Origin of the World*: “then Justice created Paradise, being beautiful and being outside the orbit of the moon and the orbit of the sun in the Land of Wantonness”²⁹.

3. THE IMPRESSION OF THE SHAPE IN THE SOUL

Still on the question of the soul's origin, Plutarch states in *De sera* that, right after the insemination, the intellect impresses itself upon the shape of *psyche* (τυπούσα), and the latter, in turn, enfolds the body on all sides, moulding it (ἐκμάττεται τὸ εἶδος). Thence, although the parts would be separated for a long time, they preserve each others' likeness and imprint³⁰.

This idea of the *nous* moulding the image of *psyche* and, consequently, the figure of the body, appears also in Jewish sources, such as Philo of Alexandria. He writes, regarding the two “powers” —namely, the two parts of the soul— almost in the same terms as Plutarch, that “this (scil. *pneuma*) is not just air in motion, but rather a sort of impression and stamp (*typon kai kharaktera*) of the divine power, to which Moses gives the appropriate title of ‘image’ (*eikon*)”³¹.

4. THE MOON

In the second step of the generation of human soul, the moon provokes the soul's second birth, via the adhesion of *psyche* to the *nous*³². Indeed, *De sera*, *De genio* and *De facie* concur in designating a chasm or depth (μυχός)³³ in the moon that attracts the soul as the main location for its future. This chasm is surely the earth's shadow, ending

²⁷ See *Thr.St.Seth* (NHC VII) 118, 30-119, 10, transl. Robinson. There are other systems, such as that where light, in the form of the heavenly “man”, falls directly into the earthly body of Adam. See also Rudolph (1984: 106). Regarding the topic of being sown, see also the *Panarion* of Epiphanius 26.3.1; Roig Lanzillotta (2007: 228-229).

²⁸ See Jonas (2000: 77-78, 214-215). Regarding the influence of indo-iranian conceptions, see Piñero – Montserrat Torrens – García Bazán (1997: 92).

²⁹ *Orig.World* (NHC II 5) 110, 1-10, transl. Bethge – Layton.

³⁰ Plu. *De facie* 945a, 944f. It is called εἶδωλον, with certain reminiscences of Homer's nomenclature. See also Plu. *De sera* 565d: εἶδος. Cherniss (1968: 216-217 n. b) points out to Pl. *Ti.* 34b. See also about this process Plu. *Quaest. Plat.* 1002f; Pl. *Ti.* 30b.

³¹ Ph. *Comm. Deut.* 82-83, transl. Colson – Whitaker; *Leg. All.* II 6; *Spec. Leg.* I 333, and Plu. *De facie* 943a. See also Dillon (2009: 18-22).

³² See Plu. *De facie* 945d.

³³ See Plu. *De facie* 944a-c, and its charms at 945c; *De genio Socr.* 590f; *De Is. et Os.* 362a-b; *De def. or.* 437; *Amatorius* 766b. Regarding the connection of Hecate with the moon, see Cherniss (1968: 209 n. g).

at the upper limit of the sublunary region³⁴ and, in spite of its pleasant appearance, it nevertheless provokes the dissolution of the intellect (τὸ φρονοῦν)³⁵, the reanimation of the irrational and corporal parts of the soul (τὸ δὲ ἄλογον καὶ σωματοειδές) and, consequently, its aiming to be born in the earth (γένεσιν). Plutarch explains this process in physical terms, as a result of the soul's increasing weight due to the chasm's humid atmosphere³⁶.

The same abode seems to be described by Plutarch in *De genio* (590c), but in a manner closer to Plato's view. On this occasion, Timarchus contemplates islands "illuminated by one another with soft fire, taking on now one colour, now another, like a dye, as the light kept varying with their mutations"³⁷. These islands would be iconographical portrayals of individual souls waiting for incarnation or transcendence, on the one hand, and, on the other, planets that Plutarch could have seen as "countless", some "huge in size" and "not all equal", but "alike round", floating in an unstable sea or lake³⁸. As well as in *De sera*, Plutarch expounds that, when this sea moves and the soul-islands adopt a spiral movement, the area bends over its centre, causing the fall of souls to earth and, in this manner, their birth³⁹.

The cosmological conception of Gnosticism is close to Plutarch's in more than one way, as both understand that the seven planets —Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and Moon—, together with the fixed stars, are located somewhere in the distance between God and earth⁴⁰. Their aim is to join together the noetic part of the soul with the psychic one, as can be seen in the *Apocryphon of John*⁴¹, whose author gives a thorough description of how the seven planets provide the soul with its diverse terrestrial capacities, as providence, divinity, lordship, fire, kingdom, insight, and wisdom successively, in its descent to earth⁴².

Curiously, the second image of Plutarch also appears in gnostic literature, such as, for instance, the *Naassene Homily*. The flow from the heavenly to the earthly ocean signifies the coming into being of men, and, just as in Plutarch, the route in the opposite direction is that of gods, to wit, of those men who obtain a higher level of perfection: "it is Ocean —birth-causing of gods and birth-causing of men— flowing and ebbing forever, now up and now down. When Ocean flows down (he says), it is the birth-

³⁴ See De Lacy – Einarson (1959: 178).

³⁵ For Plutarch, as well as for Xenocrates and Philo, Hades is the entire area between earth and moon (Dillon [2009: 23-24, and n. 13]).

³⁶ See Plu. *De sera* 566a. See also Aguilar Fernández (1981: 8-10). Plutarch also follows this conception in other works, such as *De Is. et Os.* 382d; *De def. or.* 432d-e; as a light in *Quaest. Rom.* 281b, and *De lat. viv.* 1130b. Regarding the Plutarch's heritage from Heraclitus, see Aguilar Fernández (1981: 57-58).

³⁷ Transl. De Lacy – Einarson; See also Plu. *De sera* 563f.

³⁸ See Plu. *De genio Socr.* 590f, transl. De Lacy – Einarson; *De Is. et Os.* 359d.

³⁹ See Plu. *De genio Socr.* 591c; Fr. 177Sandbach (Soury [1942: 217 n. 1, and 156, n. 1]; des Places [1950: 66 n. 1]; Vernière [1977: 183]). This anthropological conception of human birth implies a cosmological one, by which we can understand that the cosmos is divided into four sections, as has been already pointed out by Aguilar Fernández (1981: 36); see also De Lacy – Einarson (1959: 467 n. d).

⁴⁰ See, for example, the detailed description of *Mars*. (NHC X 1) 1-5, 10.

⁴¹ See *Pap. Ber.* 48,4-51,5. Also in Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 1.29.4. See Roig Lanzillotta (2007: 195-196).

⁴² Also in the Mandaean texts, as *Left Ginza* 1 2. See Rudolph (1984: 67, 102 and 113).

causing of men; and when [it flows] up, towards the Wall and Palisade, and the 'White Rock', it is the birth-causing of gods"⁴³.

5. THE ABYSS

Moreover, Plutarch describes the abyss that should be seen as an entrance and exit for human souls like a liminal place through which pass not only new souls created by the sun's seed, but also those that come back from their sublunary existence, "like from exile to homeland"⁴⁴. If they have not being rejected and shaken by the moon, the latter receive here their final arrangements, either for another incarnation or for a definitive transcendence⁴⁵.

In this respect, the idea of transmigration, or *transomation*⁴⁶, of the soul is not alien to Gnosis⁴⁷. Indeed, as in Plutarch's writings, the *decanting* of the soul from one body to another is widespread, especially as punishment for unawakened souls⁴⁸. Thus, for example, the *Apocryphon of John* assumes that "after they are born, then, when the Spirit of life increases and the power comes and strengthens that soul, no one can lead it astray with works of evil"; however, "the souls of those who did not do this work" will be rejected, just like the moon in Plutarch: "they (*scil.* the archons) bind it with chains and cast it into prison, and consort with it until it is liberated from the forgetfulness and acquires knowledge"⁴⁹.

6. THE DEFINITIVE INCARNATION

The final step in the creation of the soul is the materialization of *psyche* and *nous* in the form of the human body. Both Gnosticism⁵⁰ and Plutarch⁵¹ conceive this moment as the act of coming into a cage, jail, or tomb⁵², due to the fact that it also means being

⁴³ Hyppol. *Refutatio* V 7, 36, transl. MacMahon. See also Rudolph (1984: 93-94).

⁴⁴ See Plu. *De facie* 943d, transl. Cherniss – Helmbold; *De gen. Socr.* 591c; *De sera* 565e-566a (Aguilar Fernández [1981: 54-55, 71]). The vocabulary preserves certain similarities to that of *De genio*, and both would at least point to Plato's *Phaedrus* 248a-b.

⁴⁵ See Plu. *De sera* 565d; *De facie* 944f.

⁴⁶ It is conceived, just as in Plutarch, in three successive steps: "They descend from the third. They bless the second; after this the first", *Thr.St.Seth* (NHC VII) 127, 19-21, transl. Robinson; *Ap.John* (NHC II 1) 4,17-19. See also Roig Lanzillotta (2011: 410). Again, there is a tradition in which a female divinity, being *sophia* or *sophia zoe*, ends the act of soul's creation of the demiurge, giving birth to the human being by uniting his soul and his *nous*, as well as Plutarch's moon; see *Orig.World* (NHC II 5) 114 (162), 24-115 (163), 115 (163), 30-121 (169), 35. See also Rudolph (1984: 98-100).

⁴⁷ See Orbe (1976: 573-597).

⁴⁸ See Rudolph (1984: 103).

⁴⁹ See *Ap.John* (NHC II,1) 26,9-27,10; 27,11-21, transl. Wisse.

⁵⁰ See F. Bovon (2010: 398-399).

⁵¹ As punishment in Plu. *De sera* 564e, 567f; as a cage, for example, in *Cons. ad ux.* 611f. See also Pl. *Phd.* 82C-83a; Brenk (1998: 29-30 and n. 5).

⁵² See Roig Lanzillotta (2007: 233-235).

in contact with passions, which inevitably distances the *nous* from its creator. In this sense, the *Apocryphon of John* explicitly asserts about the body that “This is the fetter, this is the tomb of the creature of the body, which was put upon man as a fetter of matter”⁵³. As a result of being far from its goal, the soul feels alienated. Similarly to Plutarch, the *Apocryphal Acts of Andrew* states: “and precisely that which the intellect suffered together with her when it was shattered and alienated (ἀπολισθησας) from itself”⁵⁴.

7. CONCLUSIONS

After the exposition and analysis of the presented information, it would be, in my view, problematic to accept that the similarities between Plutarch's conceptions and Gnostic ideas on the *descensus animae* are mere chance coincidences. However, certain other possibilities, not mutually exclusive, also suggest themselves:

- Here one must of course emphasize that Plutarch and the aforementioned Gnostic examples are turning their attention to some of the most intellectual sources of their age —a *koiné philosophique*⁵⁵, in Festugière's words. In this philosophical mixture can be seen traces of Orphism, Pythagoras, and, most of all, Platonism.
- Secondly, Plato's statements concerning with anthropology, ethics, and cosmology —especially those of *Timaeus* and *Phaedrus*— are based on several fundamental elements, such as the radical separation between the material world from the superior or spiritual one; that matter be understood as a stage where the soul is compelled to live under the influence of *tyche* and passions; and, finally, the existence of an intermediate place⁵⁶.

However, there are other innovative solutions, both different from those of Plato and common to Plutarch and Gnostic literature that do not point only to the influence of Aristotle and Xenocrates, among others⁵⁷, but also possibly to a common inspiration, that should be further explored.

⁵³ See *Ap. John* (NHC II, 1) 21, 10, transl. Wisse; *Zost.* (NHC VIII 1) 46, 1-10. See also Rudolph (1984: 103).

⁵⁴ See *V* 78-79, transl. Roig Lanzillotta; see also Roig Lanzillotta (2007: 227).

⁵⁵ See Festugière (1990: 2).

⁵⁶ See Jonas (2000: 217, n. 137).

⁵⁷ See Roig Lanzillotta (2007: 223-226).

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