

The 'people' of Israel according to Judith: A Greimassian semiotic reading of Judith 5:1–24



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The concept, 'people', could in fact be a driving force behind the authorship of the Judith narrative. On this particular theme, many insightful contributions that have already been made by various scholars are applauded. The theme and concept of people still remain a topic that needs further exploration. In this article, the use and significance of the concept 'people' in the *Judith* narrative, is explored. The aim is not only to identify and describe the concept, but aspires to further demonstrate its distinct function in view of the reader. The analysis will be done from both the figurative and the thematic level of analysis of the Greimassian semiotic approach to literary texts. It is asserted that the utilisation of the concept 'people', is possibly an intentional literary strategy by the author, to encourage the reader (first and implied) to embrace the idea of Jewish reunification in the second temple period.

Contribution: This is a literary analysis of the occurrence, use and significance of the concept, 'people', in the *book of Judith*, particularly chapter 5:1–24. The study focuses on the distinctiveness of the people of Israel and its possible function regarding the readers. The values making the people of Israel unique are studied and the suggestion made that this could have been the impetus behind the authorship of the story. The study is intuitive and does contribute towards the understanding of the religious dynamics of the *book of Judith*.

Keywords: Judith; people; Greimas; literary analysis; figurative analysis; thematic analysis.

Introduction

Problem statement

Efthimiadis-Keith (2014:860) acknowledges that 'the Judith narrative¹ has been studied from a variety of different perspectives throughout its reception history; historical-critical, literary, and mixture of both'. This article is a literary analysis that focuses on the occurrence of the theme or the motif of 'people', and its significance in the *book of Judith*. The concept or the motif of 'people' in the Judith narrative may in fact be viewed as a driving force behind its authorship. While there are countless contributions published, hailing the performances of certain characters in this story, it is postulated that the performance of each character (e.g., Judith, Achior, the Maid servant, etc.) could be viewed as efforts to advance the interests of the (Jewish) 'people' in the story. A special focus is on the people of Israel, as a collective character. Few scholars investigated this particular avenue. While summarising the *Judith* narrative, Hobyane et al. (2018:1), confirm that '*Judith* is a story of the survival of the people of Israel from the impending onslaught by Nebuchadnezzar, who is said to be the king of Assyria (1:1)'. This summary is appreciated, in that it acknowledges that *Judith* is about the 'people of Israel' and how they survived the impending onslaught. It is the survival of these people that persuaded the author to write the story. About *Judith*, Esler (2002:107) also says that 'Judith gains victory for her people by first deceiving and then decapitating the leader of the enemy host, whom she seductively reduced to drunken unconsciousness' (cf. also Hobyane 2016:191; White 1992:5–16). Moore (1992:61–71) points out that '*Judith* can also be summarised as the story of how a Jewish woman paves the way for her people's victory over an invading Assyrian army'. Perhaps the summary of the story by Tamber-Rosenau (2017; cf. Schmitz 2008:77) is the most appropriate and insightful. She stated:

Judith is a beautiful, wise, and virtuous widow who intervenes in the Assyrian siege of her Israelite town by dolling herself up, sashaying into the Assyrian camp, and over the course of three days and nights, flirting her way into the tent of the general, Holofernes. Holofernes, in his excitement at the prospect of sex with Judith, drinks too much and passes out. Judith beheads him with his own sword and carries his head back home, ending the siege and bringing peace to (the people) of Israel. (p. 65)

1. This article takes a viewpoint of many other authors in viewing the Judith narrative as a moral tale, and not as actual history (cf. Cornelius 2009:417; DeSilva 2002:92; Eckhardt 2009:243, 260).

While these citations (and many more) may sound like a repetition of another well-known story, they serve to underscore the idea that the *Judith* narrative is more about the people of Israel than the performance of any individual character in the story. Characters, in this case, are in the story to confirm² (by performing) the narrator's point of view concerning the people of Israel, as arranged by the implied author.

The composition is explored (who are they?), their nature and significance (what is unique about them?) and their possible function (what could be their rhetorical role to the reader?) of the 'λαὸς – people' of Israel in the story. This will be limited to only the fifth chapter of the story, i.e. Achior's report to Holofernes (ch. 5).

Methodological orientation

The investigation of the 'people' motif in *Judith* 5 is done from the figurative and thematic interpretive angle of the Greimassian semiotic approach to literary texts. In the first place, the figurative analysis will focus on the construction of the figures (i.e. the people of Israel) and their significance to the reader. According to the Greimassian semiotic approach, actors, space, and time are the main figures of a text, and they are a deliberate construction by the author of the story (Everaert-Desmedt 2007:30). At this level of analysis, figures are explored taking into consideration the opposition (figurative oppositions or powerplay) that may exist among them in the story. It is asserted that without meaningful or notable opposition, the story may not have a meaning (Martin & Ringham 2000:7).

Secondly, the thematic analysis (also called the 'deep level of analysis') is concerned with the investigation of the fundamental values, that account for the generation of a text. These values are sensed desirable by the author, and the story is about their promotion or preservation. Therefore, in exploring the concept 'people', attention will be paid to these values undergirding them. Comments will be made on the function of these values to the reader, when reading the story.

Analysis of *Judith* 5:1–24

Figurative analysis: The people of Israel

The *Judith* narrative refers to a group of people in question, in four different ways, i.e., οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ – children of Israel (4:1), ὁ λαὸς τῆς Ἰουδαίας – people of Judea (4:1), οἱ κατοικοῦντες ἐν Ἰερουσαλὴμ – inhabitants of Jerusalem (15:8), and τοῖς κατοικοῦσι Βαιτυλωνα καὶ Βαιτομεσθαιμ – the inhabitants of Bethulia,³ and Betomestham (15:6). It is notable that the *Judith* narrative also mentions other groups of people that exist along with 'Israelites' in the story, e.g., the Assyrians, the Medes, and many others (1:7–10).

2.Schmitz (2008:77) on the role of the characters in the story.

3.The existence is acknowledged of various interpretations regarding the geographical location of places like Bethulia within the *Judith* scholarship. This collective character is grouped together, not based on their geographical location, but according to their ideological or religious conviction, i.e., people who believe in the God of Israel.

The children of Israel are the third most mentioned group or character (38 times), following God (82 times) and Holofernes (45 times), in the entire narrative (Hobyane 2012:23). In chapter 5, they are explicitly mentioned or referred to six times in Achior's report and dialogue with Holofernes. However, it is noted that in Achior's report, from verse 6 to 21, they are referred to in the third person (with third person plural verbs and the genitive personal pronoun αὐτῶν), as people about whom Achior reports to Holofernes. Table 1 summarises the number of times in the story that 'the people of Israel' are mentioned (cf. Table 1).

The number of occurrences of the people of Israel as a group-character, is notable. Having read the whole story, I find it plausible to argue that significant tension occurs in this group character and that transformation happens. In chapter 5, the narrator reports that upon getting a report (ἀνηγγέλη) that the people of Israel are preparing for war against the Assyrians, Holofernes shows interest in knowing more about them, e.g. Who are they? (τίς ὁ λαὸς οὗτος ὁ κατήμενος ἐν τῇ ὀρεινῇ); what is their exact geographical locations or cities (τίνες αἱ κατοικοῦσιν πόλεις); what is their military strength (τὸ πλῆθος τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτῶν); who is their king or military leader (τίς ἀνέστηκεν ἐπ' αὐτῶν βασιλεὺς ἡγούμενος στρατιᾶς αὐτῶν), and why is it that they alone resist to surrender to Holofernes and his army? Holofernes' inquiry summarises the impetus behind this article. His questions assist the reader to establish the identity and significance of the Israelites in the narrative. These questions seem to be a benchmark for studying any other group in the story. However, as already mentioned, this analysis will focus solely on the people of Israel.

Mapping out significant oppositions in the narrative

Before proceeding with the analysis of the significance of the Israelites as a group character, the significant opposition that exists in the story is mapped out. Hobyane (2012:57) says, 'Despite the fact that the Israelites appear as secondary actors in the story, they, as a collective actor, play an essential role in the story'. They appear in 5:1–4 as a unique target and an opposition to Holofernes' destructive mission. Following the Greimassian approach to narrative texts, particularly the figurative analysis (figurative oppositions), this staged opposition contributes hugely to giving meaning to the story. For any semiotic study to achieve its goal, there must be a proper analysis of the existing opposition in the story (Martin & Ringham 2000:7).

TABLE 1: The number of occurrences of 'the people of Israel' in the *book of Judith*.

The People	Occurrences	Page reference Hobyane (2012)
Children of Israel	38 times	4:1, 4:3, 4:9, 4:11, 4:13, 4:15, 4:15, 5:1, 5:6, 5:19, 5:23, 6:14, 6:18, 7:6, 7:13, 7:14, 7:19, 7:23, 7:30, 7:32, 8:9, 8:11, 8:12, 8:24, 9:13, 9:14, 10:7, 10:19, 11:2, 11:9, 11:10, 11:12, 13:17, 13:20, 15:5, 15:7, 16:1 and 16:25

People of Judea (Jewish -
people, the inhabitants
of Bethulia)

Source: Hobyane, R.S., 2012, 'A Greimassian semiotic analysis of *Judith*', PhD thesis, Potchefstroom, North-West University.

The details of the staged opposition between the Assyrians and the Israelites are revealed in Achior's report, particularly the religious uniqueness of the Israelites. After summoning all the princes of Moab and the commanders of Ammon and all the governors of the coastland, Achior (the leader of all the Ammonites) steps forward to give a report (5:5). Achior steps forward to give a word of truth (τὴν ἀλήθειαν περὶ τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου) about the people of Israel to Holofernes. In his report, he attempts to answer all the questions Holofernes sought to know in 5:1–3. Achior provides a number of pointers about the people of Israel as follows:

- This people are descendants of the Chaldeans (ὁ λαὸς οὗτός εἰσιν ἀπόγονοι Χαλδαίων). This report immediately points the reader to associate the 'ὁ λαὸς – people' in *Judith* with Abram in Genesis 11.
- In 5:8, Achior reports that at one time, these people lived in Mesopotamia (καὶ παρώκησαν τὸ πρότερον ἐν τῇ Μεσοποταμίᾳ).
- In 5:8, they were not willing to obey or follow the gods of their fathers (οὐκ ἐβουλήθησαν ἀκολουθεῖν τοῖς θεοῖς τῶν πατέρων αὐτῶν).
- In 5:8, they are reported to be people who worship the God of Heaven (καὶ προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ).
- From 5:9–16 it seems to be about the covenantal people of God (Israelites). It is the retelling of the Exodus story, until the children of Israel settled in Canaan, as reported in the books of Genesis, Exodus and Joshua.
- In 5:17–19 Achior reports that the God of heaven is their defence. As long as they do not sin against Him, He always defends them against their enemies.
- In 5:20–21, Achior warns Holofernes to do a thorough investigation before he attacks the Israelites, whether they have sinned against their God or not, since he risks being humiliated in defeat, if they are in a good standing with their God, for their God will defend them.

Achior's warning and advice was not welcomed by Holofernes' people. In fact, it infuriated them. They consequently resolved to continue with their attack on Israel. As for Achior, he was banished to the hill country (Israel), so that he may be destroyed together with them, when Holofernes attacks them.

As for the group character (Israelites), in relation to the theme of this article, a few questions can be posed: What is their significance in the narrative? What makes them unique and different from the rest of the characters in the story? And what is their function towards the reader of the story? The following subsection is dedicated to the analysis of the values that make the people of Israel unique in the narrative (their distinctiveness). These values will later be put in a veridictory square.

They are the covenantal people of God, the God of heaven

Among other, Achior's speech points out that the reader is dealing with the covenantal people of God. This value or character trait singles them out from the rest. Achior reports that they worship no other god but Him. According to 5:8, they abandoned the gods of their fathers to follow the God of

heaven. They committed to him their service. This unique quality about the people of Israel, creates tension in the story. Holofernes' dream and mission (Nebuchadnezzar's commission, we may say) is to conquer and subdue all the nations, so that they worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god (3:8). While the Assyrians worship Nebuchadnezzar, the people of Israel worship the God of heaven. The people of Israel are an ideological and religious contrast to Assyria in the narrative (Hobyane 2012:59). Without this contrast (figurative opposition) the story may have been meaningless. Equally so, the Israelites and their uniqueness are significant in the story and without them, the story will be meaningless. Hobyane (2012:60) says: 'The Israelites are the very inspiration behind the whole act of the heroine of the story, Judith (16:25)'. Judith risks her life for the sake of their religion and the honour of their God. This narrative is presented in such a way that this message is clear to the reader. For example, in 9:13 the text reports:

καὶ δὸς λόγον μου καὶ ἀπάτην εἰς τραῦμα καὶ μώλωπα αὐτῶν, οἱ κατὰ τῆς διαθήκης σου – make my deceitful words bring wound and bruise on those who have planned cruel things against your covenant.

While commenting on this utterance, Efthimiadis Keith (2014:872) says, 'Judith 9:13 make it clear that the author saw the "Assyrian" attack as an attack against the covenant'. She continues to mention that, had the Bethulians given in to Holofernes, they and all their fellow Judeans would have been taken into slavery and dispersed, and thus reversing the exodus, in which they were freed from slavery, as well as their return from exile, which may be regarded as a second exodus. The covenant, or the reference to covenantal people, makes the Israelites in *Judith* a unique people, and there is a call to the reader to see them for what and who they are: they are God's chosen people.

They are people identified with the temple (sanctuary)

Very closely related to the point above, is the fact that the people of Israel are identified with the sanctuary (the temple) in Jerusalem (5:19). In *Judith* 4:1–2 it is stated that the Israelites, who had returned from exile and were determined to obey the Lord in rituals of worship, reacted with horror at the thought of the destruction of their temple. As a result of this threat, they chose to unite and defend access to it and to cry out to the Lord, and to fast and humble themselves (4:8–11) before the Lord (Jordaan & Hobyane 2009:245). Jerusalem and the temple are of critical importance to the people of Israel. These are symbols of Israel's special relationship with God, and therefore very critical to their identity as a group of people. In this regard, Cohen (2006) remarks that:

[A]s the focal point of the religion, the temple was the central communal institution not just for the Jews of the land of Israel but also for those of the diaspora. (p. 101)

He further indicates that the temple represented monism and exclusivity: 'one temple for one God'.

Even though there are no major actions taking place in Jerusalem (temple) until the victory is gained in 16:18–20, it

could be argued that it (Jerusalem) remains a place which every Israelite will defend with their lives (Judith being a good example) against the looming destruction by the Assyrians. Regarding the safety of Jerusalem, Branch (2011:66) says 'Jerusalem is loved by the Israelites because of what it represents: the site of the Lord's Temple and, at some future, unspecified time, the Throne of the Lord' (Jr 3:17). Furthermore, according to 16:18, Jerusalem is a place of worship (προσεκύνησαν τῷ θεῷ), purification (ἐκαθαρίσθη ὁ λαός), and offering (ἀνήνεγκαν τὰ ὀλοκαυτώματα αὐτῶν), while in 16:20, it is described as a place of feasting (καὶ ἦν ὁ λαὸς εὐφραίνόμενος ἐν Ἱερουσαλὴμ). It is this setting where the feast of celebrating Judith's victory continues for 3 months. After this celebration, everyone returns to their place of inheritance, including Judith.

God is their strength and defence

As already indicated, Holofernes' inquiry in 5:3 about the people of Israel, included establishing the source of their military strength, their king, or captain of their army. Achior responds to these questions in his report. He mentions in 5:21 that the God of heaven whom they follow, or worship is their military strength. He defends them. Very critical in his report, Achior mentions that:

καὶ ἕως οὐχ ἡμαρτον ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ αὐτῶν, ἦν μετ' αὐτῶν τὰ ἀγαθὰ ὅτι θεὸς μισὼν ἀδικίαν μετ' αὐτῶν ἐστίν – as long as they did not sin against their God they prospered, for the God who hates iniquity is with them.

Unlike the Assyrians who trust in the might of their army, the people of Israel trust in God for protection and victory over their enemies. As long as they do not sin against Him, they will always overcome their enemies. The ideological contrast between the Israelites and the Assyrian camp is critical to the meaning of the story and the unique nature of the people of Israel in *Judith*. It may be argued, in relation to Israel, that this may well be the ideological standpoint of the implied author, and the reader is persuaded to adopt it. Regarding the role of the Assyrians in *Judith*, Hobyane (2012:51) has already suggested that 'the Assyrian army is nothing more than a threatening symbol used artificially to unite the house of Israel and to invoke God's protective power over Israel'. In this regard, the *Judith* narrative is formulated and presented in such a way, that the reader is duly encouraged to admire this and is subsequently invited to subscribe to God's protective power also.

In summary, it can be stated that the setting of Jerusalem (the site of the temple) is associated with God and his covenantal people. As the Assyrian army trusted in Nebuchadnezzar, who is based in Nineveh, the Israelites trusted in God, whose dwelling place is in Jerusalem in the temple. Jerusalem is the heart of the Jewish religion, and therefore it inspires an opposite ideology to that of Assyria and Nineveh. This fact speaks volume about the identity of the people of Israel in *Judith*.

The figurative analysis done above, focused on the construction of figures and their significance to the reader. The figure that this article is interested in is the people of Israel (οἱ υἱοὶ Ἰσραὴλ) and the aspects that make them who they are and give significance to the story.

The following section will provide an application of the thematic analysis to the text. The section will provide a schematic representation in a veridictory square of the results established in the figurative analysis.

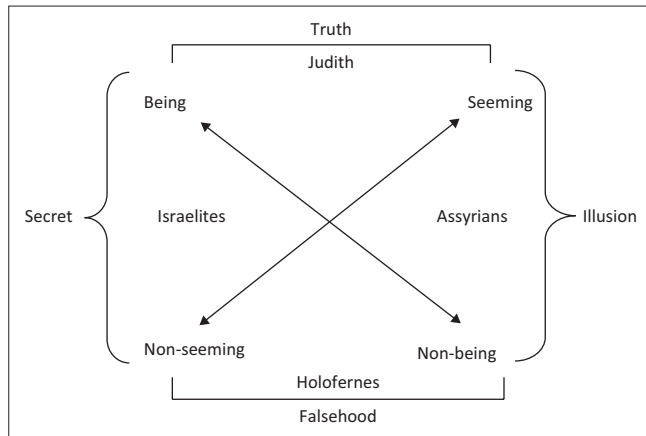
Thematic analysis of Judith

The thematic analysis focuses on isolating and comparing values that possibly generated the story. Narratives are designed to convey certain specific messages to challenge existing ideologies, by promoting certain values and rejecting some in the narrated world. In this case, Achior's report in *Judith*, is judged to be conveying certain message(s) about the uniqueness of the Israelites in the story. And this uniqueness is brought about by the values that make them who they are, and this is possibly what the author desires to communicate to the reader through the story. Therefore, in the composition of the story, the main and secondary characters, compete to achieve the promotion or rejection of the desired or undesired values.

It should also be noted that narratives are composed in different ways. In some narratives it is difficult to judge the actions of competing subjects. Actions of one subject may appear to be true or real, while that is not the case. The Assyrians in *Judith*, for example seem to be an undefeatable and unchallengeable army in pursuit of their goal (2:5), while the Israelites appear to be weak and defenceless, but this is actually not the case (cf. Nickelsburg 2005:97). Hobyane (2016:5) says: 'Before the introduction of Judith, the elders (men) appear to be weak, stupid and impaired', as Levine (1992:20) also indicates. On the narrative level, there is a conflict between being and seeming. In these types of narratives, there is a manipulation of the truth to convince the readers. In attempting to contribute to our current theme, i.e. the 'people' motif, it is critical to explore this phenomenon. Therefore, a veridictory square is utilised to map out the values that define the people involved in the narrative. In essence, the endeavour here is to map out the fundamental values, as extracted from Achior's report, by using a veridictory square.

The *Être* (being) and *paraître* (seeming) constitute the two basic modalities of the veridictory square (Courtes 1991:11–119; 1995:81–84; Greimas & Courtes 1982:194; Martin & Ringham 2000:139; cf. Hobyane 2016:4) as shown in Figure 1.

The semiotic square of veridiction above, illustrates the distinctiveness of the two nations (Israelites and Assyrians) with the contribution of their respective main characters, i.e. Judith and Holofernes and the values or anti-values they represent in the story.



Source: Hobyane, R.S., 2012, 'A Greimassian semiotic analysis of Judith', PhD thesis, Potchefstroom, North-West University

FIGURE 1: The schema illustrates the figurative oppositions between the people of Israel and the Assyrians, based on Achior's report in 5:1–24.

- The Israelites follow and worship the God of heaven and they are committed to him (this is somehow not known to the Assyrians). This is a secret weapon, that Israel trusts in their God,⁴ while the Assyrians worship Nebuchadnezzar and intend forcing everyone to recognise him alone as their god (illusion).
- At the beginning of the narrative, the Assyrians seem to be powerful and in control to achieve their goal of having all the nations worship Nebuchadnezzar as a god (seemingly), while the Israelites do not seem to be strong enough to stand against the Assyrians (non-seemingly). However, after the introduction of Judith, the Israelites' tenacity assists the reader to realise their distinctiveness (being), while the Assyrians assume their true nature (non-being). The Israelites (through Judith), successfully defend their values and distinctiveness,⁵ as Achior declared in 5:5, 21 (cf. Harrington 1999:27; Moore 1992:61–1). In this case, the truth about the Israelites as people who trust in God for victory, is revealed while at the same time, the falsehood⁶ of the Assyrians is also laid bare before the reader of the story.

The aforementioned schema can be used to infer the values (and anti-values to be avoided) that gives the Israelites a unique group identity in the story, for instance:

- Worshipping the God of heaven is of good value. This value must be defended and upheld by the Israelites, and therefore any other proposition contrary to it, is unacceptable. Therefore, worshipping Nebuchadnezzar as a god, from the Israel's perspective, is an anti-value that is unacceptable.
- Since Israel is the covenantal people of God, it is therefore honourable to show love for Jerusalem and the temple.

4. According to Greimas (1966:146–147; 1987:107–108).

5. Israel is the covenantal people of God, while the Assyrians are non-covenantal people; Israel trusts in God for victory, while the Assyrians trust in their own military strength; Israel's sacred place of worship is in the temple in Jerusalem, while the Assyrians probably have Nineveh (where Nebuchadnezzar resides) as their centre of worship (cf. Hobyane 2016:5).

6. Wennel (2007:68) says, 'Nebuchadnezzar and the Assyrian cult are falsehoods and therefore cannot be accepted by God's covenantal people'.

Judith is honoured for her act of tenacity and bravery against the opposition in the story (cf. Hobyane 2023; Wennel 2007:68). The story of Judith is told in such a way, that the reader understands that it is in fact not good to surrender the city (as the elders suggested in 7:29–32) to the Assyrians.

- It can further be asserted, that the resistance of Israel against the Assyrians by the people of Israel, is in fact a fight for their freedom to worship the God of heaven, without any threats.

The few points highlighted above, assist the reader to point out the critical values that make the Israelites what they are, and what they are not in the story. Among many other possible purposes of the story, it seems logical to argue that the *book of Judith* was also intended to highlight and clarify this point. Israel is the covenantal people of God and therefore cannot compromise their relationship with their God by worshipping other god(s), e.g. Nebuchadnezzar.

Conclusion

The article aimed at contributing to the conference theme, 'What makes a people, according to Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature', by doing a Greimassian analysis of the 'people of Israel', as formulated and presented in Judith 5:1–24. The focus is on the two aspects of Greimas, i.e. the figurative and thematic analysis. With respect to the figurative analysis, it is firstly conceded that alongside the people of Israel in the story, are other groups, like Assyrians, Medes, Moabites, et cetera. Thus a figurative analysis of the 'people of Israel' was conducted, as they appear in *Judith* 5:1–24. It was noted that this group plays a notable role and does give the reader a reason to argue that the story revolves around them and their well-being.

Regarding the thematic analysis, it is established that there are specific themes that are emphasised in the story – themes that describes the identity and the significance of this group in the narrative. In 5:1–24, Achior's report reveals that the Israelites are a covenantal people of God. They therefore worship the God of heaven alone, whose dwelling place is in the temple in Jerusalem. God is their helper and defence in times of trouble, as long as they did not sin against him (cf. Raja 1998:696). This is what makes them what they are. Showing resilience and tenacity (Judith is an example) in defending their religion from attack and threats, is not only a good thing, but also an honourable deed.

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R.S.H. is the sole author of this research article.

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Disclaimer

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