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CHRISTIAN LIFE AND THE LIVING DEAD

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Question: Can primal funeral rites be used in some way to convey a Christian message? To explore this issue we will compare the funeral rites of a Papuan cultural group with those of an African group.[1]

I will first summarise the African funeral ceremony, as Don Brown relates it in his article. Then I will describe and analyse the funeral ritual of the "Dugum Dani",[2] a Papuan culture in the Highlands of Western Papua New Guinea.[3] Once we have a picture of both rituals, we will then use the work of Arnold Van Gennep[4] and Ronald Grimes[5] to analyse the Dugum Dani ritual. By then, we will be able to draw on our findings, to work out if some aspects of the Dugum Dani funeral rites can be used in conveying a Christian message.

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[1] Don Brown, "The African Funeral Ceremony: Stumbling Block or Redemptive Analogy?", in *International Journal for Frontier Missions* 2-3 (July 1985), p. 255.

[2] It has since come to the attention of the author of this article that the name of the tribal group is now recognised as the Dugum Lani people.

[3] Karl G. Heider, *The Dugum Dani*, New York NY: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, 1970.

[4] Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, Paris Fr: Waterson, Roxana, 1909.

[5] Ronald L. Grimes, cited by Calvin W. Conkey, "The Malay Funeral Rite: A Ritual Analysis", in *International Journal for Frontier Missions* 9-2 (April 1992), p. 47.

The African Funeral Ceremony

Don Brown's article focuses on the funeral ceremony, or *kilio*, after the death of a married man.[6] The dying man is removed from his house, to a temporary hut. Burial will take place the same day as death occurs. The funeral is organised by the deceased's oldest brother, the *Mwesi*. He initiates, and completes, the grave digging, with a short hoe. Family and friends do the bulk of the digging with normal-length hoes. "The corpse is placed in the grave on its right side, facing the rising sun."[7] A cow hide, cut so that the flesh and bones remain below the knee joints, is used to cover the body.

The short hoe is thrown into the forest, or down an ant hill, by the *Mwesi* after the grave is filled in. He then bathes in the river, followed by the other men in the burial party. The widow then bathes, but only up to her waist. The other women now bathe normally. Brown points out that bathing can only take place, communally, during the *kilio*, as a communal event.[8] On returning home, the women sprinkle cool water on all the physical items that belonged to the deceased, all of which have been placed outside the deceased's house for this purpose. On the night of the burial, a *Mwesha* (sanctifier), from a remote tribe, is brought by the relatives to sleep with the widow.

The day after the burial marks the beginning of the official mourning period, which lasts for five to eight days. "On the first morning, the *Mwesha* comes out holding his throat, as if he were choking."[9] The widow stays seated indoors, only speaking to the widows, who are serving her. The *Mwesha* returns late on the fifth day. He shaves the heads of the widow, and her sons, and then sleeps with the widow again. He leaves the next morning.

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[6] Brown, "African Funeral Ceremony", p. 257.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

The widow is then told by the *Mwesi* to wash all her body in the river, to wash off all her husband's sweat. "She returns to the house, and, once again, bows her head, as the *Mwesi* declares that 'the house has been overcome'. The widow's bed is now let down to the floor."[10]

On the sixth day, a white cock is killed at the entrance to the house. The fresh blood is sprinkled outside, while the feathers are taken to the crossroads of two paths and left there. All the mourners bathe. During the morning, the widow comes out of her house, with her head up, and grief over. The *Mwesha* comes back again. "That night he takes the widow out to the bush, and sleeps with her for the third, and final, time. After a short ceremony, in which the widow is inherited by her husband's brother, or by one of the children, all are free to go home. The funeral is over."[11]

In order to analyse the funeral rites, Brown uses the work done by Van Gennep, on rites of passage. Van Gennep has pointed out that all rites of passage have three stages:

1. *Separation*, indicated by symbolic acts, depicting detachment from an earlier state.
2. *Transition*, in which a person passes through a middle realm that has few, or none, of the attributes of the past, or of the coming state.
3. *Incorporation*, shown by symbolic acts, indicating re-entry into social visibility.[12]

Van Gennep suggests that one expects the rites of separation to be the most prominent component. However, he

[10] Ibid., p. 258.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Van Gennep, *Rites of Passage*, pp. 15-25.

points out that transition and incorporation rites often show greater importance.[13]

Brown's contention is that the African funeral ceremony shares the three-part structure, identified by Van Gennep, as common to all rites of passage:[14]

> The first phase – death – separates the widow from the profane world. The second phase – burial, transition of transformation, recognised by an expression meaning "to stay inside" – continues the widow's seclusion from secular life. The third phase – incorporation, called "to come out" – is a celebration of the removal of the pollution of death, and the restoration of normal social relations.

Not only are there phases within the funeral rite, there is often meaning attached to the symbolic dynamics, which are taking place within the ritual context. Ronald Grimes tells us that "when doing ritual analysis, it is important to focus on six major areas: ritual space, ritual objects, ritual time, ritual sounds and language, ritual identity, and ritual action".[15] In doing his analysis of the African funeral ceremony, Brown has also worked with some of these major areas. He seems to have selected areas that have obvious symbolic meaning. I will attempt to do the same for the Dugum Dani funeral rites.

The Dugum Dani Funeral Rites

The Dugum Dani funeral rites have four stages. These should not be confused with the stages, identified by Gennep, though some comparison can be made. These stages are

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[13] Ibid., p. 146.
[14] Brown, "African Funeral Ceremony", p. 258. Note also that Calvin Conkey, "The Malay Funeral Rite", also uses Van Gennep's structure.
[15] Ronald Grimes, cited by Conkey, "The Malay Funeral Rite", p. 47.

identified more by the progression of ritual time and ritual action. Heider[16] describes these stages:

> The first stage of the funeral follows immediately on the death, and the second stage is held a month or so later. These first two rituals are held for an individual funeral. The third stage is a combined ritual for all the funerals in one or more confederations, and the final stage terminates all the funerals in the entire alliance area, and is held in combination with the great pig feast.

There is no hard and fast time span for all four stages. However, it seems the cycle occurs every three to five years.

(a) The Ritual – The Morning After the Death

The body is placed within the compound that belongs to the deceased, or possibly within the compound of an important man, who can afford to provide a better funeral (this is only possible, when the deceased dies within the proposed compound). The funeral begins at about eight o'clock in the morning. The corpse is displayed, sitting on the floor against the rear wall of the house, legs strapped up, so it sits in a foetal position. If the corpse is male, the body is usually displayed in the men's house. If it is female, the corpse is displayed in the cooking house. "In a 'fresh blood' funeral, for a person just killed by the enemy, the corpse is arranged in a kind of a chair, in the centre of the courtyard."[17] The reason for this is that the ghosts of the deceased need to be placated. Heider suggests that this is accomplished, to begin with, by displaying the corpse more prominently.[18]

The funeral guests arrive, those of the male's father's line bringing with them pigs, and the in-law side, funeral gifts, such as carrying nets and cowry shells. Dirging precedes the

[16] Heider, *The Dugum Dani*, p. 147.
[17] Ibid., p. 148.
[18] Ibid., p. 150.

presentation of gifts, then the nets are draped on the corpse's chair, or beside the corpse. The shells are hung around the head, and over the body, of the corpse. Heider found that each gift was interpreted as the contribution of an individual, or group, toward the placating of the ghost of the dead person, and ghosts in general.[19]

Later in the morning, two to two dozen pigs are killed, depending on the importance of the person. The dead pigs are laid side-by-side on a line from the men's house (in the case of the deceased being male) to the compound entrance. "The pigs are then butchered. Strips of the best meat are hung on racks, and the rest is put into large steam bundles, together with ferns and sweet potatoes. . . The adults of the same *sib* (blood relatives) as the dead person usually refuse to eat anything, but the rest enjoy the feast."[20] When the meal is over, pig grease is smeared over everyone. The shell bands are displayed in the same way as the killed pigs, then the men, who are closely involved in the funeral, decide who will receive the bands. The leader of the funeral rites (a close relative of the deceased, or the leader of the compound) shouts out the names of the recipients, who, in turn, reply, "*waawawa!*" The women begin their dirging again.

The corpse is then smeared with pig grease. A small pig, wrapped in a net, is held, with its snout facing the dead person. This is done, in order to draw out the soul of the dead person. The corpse is then placed on a funeral pyre, to be cremated. Everyone begins to dirge. A bundle of grass is held over the corpse, while another man shouts for the ghost to leave. He strikes the bundle with a club, stakes it with a spear, or shoots it with gun, if it is an important person. The bundle is taken to the compound entrance, where a feather wand is waved over it. This is to signify the removal of the power of the ghost.

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., p. 151.

At around 6 pm, on the day of the cremation, a group of men and boys seek to drive out the ghost from the compound by shouting for the ghost to leave. Rocks and spears are thrown in all directions.

(b) The Night Between the First and Second Days

The people of the compound, and the closest relatives, prepare to spend the night awake. A long bundle of grass is laid on the roof of the common cookhouse. Around 8 pm to 9 pm, all talking stops, and everyone moves inside. The grass bundle is taken outside the compound. Normality is then resumed.

(c) The Second Day

At dawn, one or two fingers of girls, who are close relatives, are chopped off. These are seen as funeral gifts that will impress the ghosts.[21] The bones of the deceased are removed from the fire by closely-related women. The ashes are bundled up, and hung on the wall of the common cookhouse, to await the next day. The women argue over who will receive the nets that were brought as gifts. Early in the afternoon, more guests arrive, but only about one-third in number, compared to the day before. Food is distributed.

(d) The Third Day

An older man of the compound removes the bundle of bony ashes from the cookhouse, placing them in a low slat enclosure, behind the men's house. A new carrying net, with pigtails attached to it, is made. This becomes the main tangible symbol of the dead person. This net will eventually be wrapped in other nets at the *ebe akho* ceremony, and deposited at the chief ceremonial compound of the alliance. Feasting begins again.

[21] Ibid., p. 155.

(e) The Fourth Day

In the evening, water is poured over the cremation ashes, in the bone enclosure behind the men's house. Heider received no special explanation for this.[22]

(f) The Fifth Day

The first phase of the funeral is over. "In the courtyard, sprigs of wild raspberry are laid over the cracked rocks used to heat the steam bundles (of food), to remove, or to neutralise, the supernatural power that has accumulated in the rocks, or the compound, during the last four days of ceremonies."[23] A grass bundle, representing the ghost, is taken to a ghost house in the forest.

(g) The Second Stage of the Funeral Rites – Four to Six Weeks After the First Stage

Heider[24] summarises this stage as follows: first day: in the afternoon, the *ilkho* is announced for the next day. This is the pig-killing ceremony, similar to that of the first stage. Second day: pigs killed, eaten, pig meat distributed. Third day: women remove mourning mud (Heider did not describe when this was put on), boys renew their penis gourds. The arch ceremony takes place. This is a symbolic feeding of the ghost. Pig and sweet potato are eaten. Fourth day: pig and sweet potato eaten, mourning moustaches removed.

In regard to this second stage, Heider conveys the rich significance it has:

> Informants said the purpose of this ritual was to placate the ghost, and also to restore the *edai egen*, or soul matter, of those most-deeply moved by the death. Such explicitness is unusual. Although the funeral activity, as

[22] Ibid., p. 156.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., p. 158.

> a whole, can be seen as a gathering of the members and resources of the community, to support those closest to the dead person in their deep distress. In fact, during much of the time, they are tactfully ignored, left alone, in the midst of the crowd of funeral guests. But, at this one moment, they become of focus of the ritual.[25]

(h) The Third Stage of Funeral Rites

This phase was a combined ceremony, incorporating all funerals since the alliance-wide *ebe akho* ceremony had last taken place. The ritual begins in individual compounds, moves to the ceremonial leader's compound, and then returns to the individual compounds. On the first and second days, nets, shell bands, and stones are collected, to make up one large bundle for each funeral. A funeral dirge can be heard, with some talking. The women keep out of sight. On the third day, the ritual moves to the ceremonial leader's compound, where the bundles, representing each funeral, are spread out in the courtyard. The ceremonial leader inspects the goods displayed, then stopping at each bundle, touches it with a hand, or a foot, shouting out the name of the dead person it represented.[26] The atmosphere returns back to normal. The fourth day marks a return to the home compound, where the bundles are again laid out, and an important man of the village shouts out the names of the dead over the bundles. Feasting begins again.

(i) The Fourth Stage of Funeral Rites

This stage forms one part of the *ebe akho* ceremony, the major pig feast. Not only is the fourth stage the "final, and culminating, phase of all funerals, but it is also the only time when marriages and boys' initiation rites are held".[27] It is notable that the five-year cycle of events is also used to limit access to sexual partners for that same period, where sexual

[25] Ibid., p. 159.
[26] Ibid., pp. 160-161.
[27] Ibid., p. 162.

abstinence is sanctioned.[28] The events that link this stage with previous stages are the killing of pigs and feasting. There is also another arch ceremony, held in connection with previous funerals. This would be to feed and placate the ghosts.

The death of a person begins a series of rituals that extend over a period of several years. The major goals that these rituals seek to achieve appear to be the disposal of the body by cremation, the driving of the ghost of the dead person away from the settlement area, and, subsequently, to keep it placated, so that it will not return. The funeral rituals also function to strengthen kinship ties, providing a social forum, where marriage and boys' initiation rites are performed. The importance of the exchange of goods, which occurs as part of the funeral rituals, emphasises how integrated the economic order is, with the Dani view of life and death.

In seeking to analyse the Dani funeral ritual, using Gennep's three stages, we can note the following:

- Stage one of the funeral, through to day one of stage two, marks the period of *separation*. This stage is highlighted by symbolic acts, depicting detachment. There is the detachment of the deceased from the land of the living. This is marked with the display of the body, the attempt to remove the soul, or ghost, from the body, the cremation of the body, and the placement of the bones and ashes outside of living quarters. Those, whom the deceased leaves behind, are also going through a period of separation. This is marked by the standstill of other normal activities, and the beginning of funeral rites. Symbolic acts include dirging, the placement of mourning mud, and,

[28] The writer could not find any verifiable explanation for abstinence, except to conclude that the sanctions against sex were incidental to the Dani's rather low level of interest in sex. Ibid., p. 168.

later, pig grease, on the body, growth of mourning moustaches, and the refusal to eat on the day after the death.

- The second day of the second stage of the funeral seems to mark the official beginning of the stage of *transition*. However, the third day of the first stage represents a beginning to this, where the women make up a carrying net that represents the deceased. Now that the ghost of the deceased is free, there is a need to placate it, and to drive it out of the land of the living, so that it will join the rest of the ancestral group of living dead. Those, who are alive desire as smooth a transition back into normal life as possible, without interference from an angry ancestor. The *ilkho* pig-killing ritual provides a path to lead the ghost out of the village or compound. The shell bands, which represent economic exchange, are also laid out in a similar fashion. The arch ceremony (a vicarious eating, on behalf of the dead) is symbolic of the presentation of food required for the journey to the ancestors.

- While day three of the second stage marks the beginning of the stage of *incorporation*, it is notable that the placation of the ghost is a major theme of rituals that are repeated within the larger community of the alliance. Incorporation of the living back into normality, within the compound, is marked by the removal of mourning mud, and moustaches. Incorporation back into the wider community of the living is highlighted by the alliance-wide ceremonies, in stages three and four of the ritual. This incorporation is pronounced, in the use of the special gathering of the funeral for marriage and initiation rites. The symbolic use of a carrying net, placed beside many other nets of

> those who have died since the last ceremony, pronounces the deceased's incorporation into the wider community of the ancestors. The nets are filled with food and goods, in order to help the deceased in the community of the living dead.

The Possibilities of Using Primal Funeral Rituals to Convey a Christian Message

Don Brown suggests that death in African societies "is associated with pollution, and pollution is often believed to be removed through the ritual sex act – a prescribed obscenity for a special occasion", which "carries the pollution to the remote, undefined, outside world".[29] In identifying the main issue to be dealt with, in the funeral ritual as pollution, Brown goes on to suggest that the *kilio* points to the biblical portrayal of regeneration:

> Despite the difficulties presented by the role of the *Mwesha*, I believe the *kilio*, and most African rites of passage, are clear-cut pictures of death (separation), burial (transformation, through union), and resurrection (incorporation) . . . although a scapegoat, or the *Mwesha*, must be summoned, again and again, now we have access to a Redeemer, who, at the cross, took away the pollution of sin and death forever.[30]

Brown notes that one of the difficulties, in considering the *kilio* as a potential redemptive analogy, is the danger of syncretism. Christians cannot condone the ritual act of removing the pollution of death, by prescribed extramarital sex. He suggests that missionaries re-examine the death ritual, consult with tribal elders, and suggest functional substitutes.

[29] Brown, "African Funeral Ceremony", pp. 260-261.
[30] Ibid., pp. 262-263.

Then the *kilio* can be cited in preaching as a parallel to the process of salvation.[31]

Having seen the possibilities of conveying a Christian message, through one primal funeral ritual, we need to see if the funeral ritual of the Dugum Dani people has similar entry points and possibilities.

In exploring these possibilities, we need to engage at the level that Hiebert[32] describes as the excluded middle. This is the level of supernatural, this-worldly beings and forces that make up a primal worldview. This is the level of human history, where a power encounter is an entry point into animistic spiritism.[33]

Placation of the ghost of the deceased has been identified as one of the main issues in the funeral ritual of the Dugum Dani. In relation to this, there is a constant paying of a price of the ghost of the deceased, be it through killing pigs, presentation of the fingers of a close female relative, vicarious eating, seen in the arch ritual, or the collection of food and shell bands in carrying nets, representing the deceased. We have also noted that there are the stages of separation, transition, and incorporation. Can we go as far as Brown, to suggest that this is a biblical portrait of regeneration? I'm not sure. There is often much overlap, and repetition of ritual, in the context of the Dugum Dani funeral ritual.

It seems to me that the constant desire to placate the ghost of the deceased could be used as an entry point for the biblical concept of atonement, including propitiation, and redemption. The gospel agrees with the Dani's view that there is a price to pay that frees us from the powers of the unseen

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[31] Ibid., p. 262.
[32] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1994, pp. 196-201.
[33] Ibid., p. 199.

world of ancestors. In the case of the Dani people, it is payment towards freedom from the harm that the ghost of the deceased can bring, for the whole community. In the case of the Christian message, it is the paying of a price that frees us from the jeopardy of guilt, enslavement to sin, and expectation of wrath (Rom 3:24; Gal 4:4-5; Col 1:14). Christ can be presented as the one who has dealt fully with the powers of the ancestors. There is no longer any need to placate the ghost of a departed relative.

Kwame Bediako's thinking is helpful at this point: "Now, God's saving power focuses on Christ: Christ assumes the roles of all these points of our piety, which we addressed to various sources of power."[34]

Power issues would still dominate, but now their focus is on Christ. Worship and ritual patterns would change, then, from a focus on manipulation and control, to one of intercession, and, finally, praise. The power of God, through Christ, has come to replace all other avenues of power, and has become the central focus of the believers' faith and devotion. Christ, in Kwame Bediako's words, "has come to sit on the seat of the ancestors".[35]

Primal funeral rituals can convey a Christian message. These rituals are a vehicle that can be used in the contextualisation of the Christian message into the worldview of respondents, within a primal culture. David J. Hesselgrave

[34] Kwame Bediako, "Biblical Christologies in the Context of African Traditional Religions", in *Sharing Jesus in the Two-thirds World*, Viney Samuel, and Chris Sugden, eds, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1983, p. 117.
[35] Ibid.

suggests four steps that can lead to the contextualisation of the Christian message.[36]

- First, there is a definition of beliefs, where there is comparing and contrasting of divine truth and culture.
- Secondly, the Christian communicator selects appropriate truth to communicate.
- Thirdly, a process of adaptation is undertaken, where terms are defined, and content is selected that relates to the particular concerns, raised by the worldview being communicated with.
- Lastly, a process of application is undertaken. This is not application of the general message only. It is application of a personal message, in a compelling way, carried out by the communicator, with the realisation that the Holy Spirit's role is essential, and may not always involve the communicator directly, or result in a Christian understanding that the communicator is expecting.

Hesselgrave's steps are useful, as they enable the Christian communicator to encode the Christian message in such a way that it will become meaningful to the respondents.

Primal funeral rituals are useful as entry points for the Christian messages simply because they offer points of contact, where communication begins at a worldview level. It is important that the Christian communicator has a strategy that recognises the existence of the unseen, and does not reject those ideas as being mere superstitions. In accepting the funeral rituals and customs of a primal society as being meaningful and

[36] David J. Hesselgrave, "Worldview and Contextualisation" in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, Ralph D. Winter, and Steven C. Hawthorne, eds, Pasadena CA: William Carey Library, 1992, pp. C49-C52.

significant, one needs to be careful not to overlook the essential sinfulness of humankind. Sin affects not only individuals, but human cultures as well.

As the Christian message enters a culture, it comes as both judge and redeemer. In using a primal funeral ritual as a bridge to communicate the gospel, some aspects of the ritual will remain the same. However, other aspects of the ritual will need to be evaluated by the gospel, according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness.

The role of the Christian communicator is not to do away with, or ignore, traditional rituals and culture. A meaningful community has traditional rites of passage and rituals. Thus, a process of change will be facilitated by the Christian communicator, who helps the new Christian community create new, contextualised Christian practices that are relevant to them, as Christian people. Yes, there is the danger of syncretism, but as the new community reads the scriptures, it will continue to reassess its own customs and beliefs.

As believers, in a world of unseen powers, a community, practising primal funeral rituals, will want to see the reality of a greater power, before changing allegiance to another god. As the gospel is preached, and lived out, in the context of the funeral ritual, those who are afraid of evil spirits will desire the protection of a loving, powerful God. As this protection is observed, and the gospel is communicated, a personal commitment to the gospel is needed. A choice will have to be made to leave behind old beliefs, and take on the Christian life and community. This is a pattern observed in the scriptures. Joshua challenges the people of Israel to visibly demonstrate their allegiance: "Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . We, too, will serve the Lord, because He is our God. .

. . Throw away the foreign gods that are among you, and yield your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel" (Josh 24:15-23).[37]

While there may be some continuity with the primal funeral ritual, there will also be symbolic demonstrations, by Christians, in recognition of their commitment to the Lord, and their recognition of the greater power of Christ over that of their former gods and spirits, including their ancestors. It is at this point that Van Gennep's rites of passage have application to the sphere of conversion into the kingdom of God. This time of commitment to Christian faith, is a time of separation into a new kind of living that incorporates, not only the society of the living, but also the society of the living, who have died, both of which, having committed themselves to Christian faith, find themselves in the kingdom of God.

This separation from primal traditions has been made easier, because of the stresses faced from an invasion of Western values, concepts, and commodities, which have eroded previously-accepted traditions. The gospel can bring healing to fragmented communities in such circumstances, when time is taken to both begin with the worldview of the respondents, and to build bridges that give the gospel meaning within the culture. Upon acceptance of the gospel, and separation from primal traditions that do not support the gospel, a period of transition will follow. This is a transition from the fear and capriciousness of the ancestors, in the case of a primal funeral ritual, to the love and grace of God. Finally the goal of a contextualised gospel will be incorporation – incorporation of individuals into the kingdom of God, and incorporation of the gospel into the community.

Difficulties will be faced in this process. The Apostle Paul alludes to this, when he suggests Christians are living in an in-between world, where "our citizenship is in heaven. And we

[37] Note also Acts 19:19: "A number, who had practised sorcery, brought their scrolls together, and burned them publicly."

eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body" (Phil 3:20-21).

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