

Worship and Dance

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Dance in the Old Testament



As far as artistic expression, dance was an important part of the Hebrew culture. Dances were performed on both sacred and secular occasions; however, these practices were so ingrained in the Hebrew culture that they would not typically separate the sacred from the secular. The Old Testament mentions eleven terms to describe the act of dance. This can suggest something about the Hebrew interest in the subject.

The basic Hebrew term translated “dance” means to twist, or to whirl about in circular motions. Other terms for dance mean to spring about, to jump, to leap, and to skip. Dance was used for processions, feasts and holidays.

Dance was also used to celebrate military victories. In Exodus 15:20-21, after the Lord saved the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians, Miriam, a 93 year-old woman, led the women in celebration with singing, tambourine, and dancing to the “Red Sea Song.” They praised God for what he had done and what he was going to do for those already living in the promised land. Imagine being there, exhausted from such a challenging time of bondage and finally receiving your freedom. Overwhelmed with such excitement, for the great miracle that God had done, it would only be fitting that they would use their whole beings to express emotion to God in song, instrument and dance. And that day over 2,000,000 men, women and children offered zealous praise to God. In Judges 11:34, when Jephthah, one of Israel’s judges and a mighty warrior, returned home from defeating the Ammonites, his daughter, only a child, came out to greet him, dancing to the sounds of the tambourine. And when David returned from killing Goliath, and King Saul and his army from defeating the Philistines, the women came out from all of the towns “singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and the lute” (1 Samuel 18:6).

Dances were also customary at weddings, at which young ladies dressed in their best clothing and danced in a bride-choosing ceremony (Judges 21:19-23). In Song of Solomon 6:13, a dance was performed to honor the bride. Some dances were performed just for entertainment of guests. Salome danced before politicians gathered

to celebrate her father's birthday (Matthew 14:6, Mark 6:22). In Job 21:11 children play games of dance; the Hebrew term here for dance is *raqad*, which means to skip about.

Religious gatherings were often occasions for celebration. One of my favorite examples of dance in the Bible is David dancing before the ark as it was brought into Jerusalem. He celebrated extravagantly all the way with frequent sacrifices of choice bulls. David, ceremonially dressed in priest's linen, danced with great abandon before God. The whole country was with him as he accompanied the Chest of God with shouts and trumpet blasts (2 Samuel 6:14, Message Bible). He was leaping and dancing before the Lord. Wow! I wish I were there for that occasion! David was willing to look foolish in the eyes of many in order to express his thankfulness to God. He was willing to be free and spontaneous in his expression of worship to God. He had reason to. The Ark of the Covenant contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod, and a pot of manna. It was the most sacred object in ancient worship. It was a symbol marking the presence of God. The Hebrew term here for dance in this passage is *karar*, which means to whirl about.

And of course we have to speak about the Book of Psalms. I think John Calvin said it well when he said "The Psalter serves to teach us the true method of praying aright... there is no other book in which we are more perfectly taught in the right manner of praising God." The Hebrew name for the book of Psalms is *sefer tehillim*, which means "the book of praises." Petition, praise, worship, repentance, and thankfulness have flowed for centuries from the Psalms. David and the other Psalmists, as they went through both good and challenging times, had to worship and praise their way through circumstances.

Since the Psalter was the songbook of our first century forbears, it is appropriate to draw reference from it pertaining to dance. Just as in Ecclesiastes 3:4 and Lamentations 5:15, dance is mentioned in Psalms 30:11 as the exact opposite of mourning, used rather as an expression of God's gracious actions. David was being disciplined for sin. He begged God for help and mercy, and God rescued him, healing David and forgave his sins. David changed his clothes, picked up his harp and praised the Lord. He celebrated God's favor with a party! And at the close of the Psalter, in Psalms 149:3 and 150:4, the psalmist urged the people to praise God with music and dancing.

Dance in the New Testament

The Greek terms for dance mean "row" or "ring". These two terms are used five times in the New Testament. In Matthew 11:16-17, and Luke 7:32, Jesus challenges the attitude of his generation. No matter what he says or does, they take the opposite view. They are cynical and skeptical because he challenges their comfortable and self-centered lifestyles. He says, "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;

we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.” Jesus uses these analogies to the Pharisees and teachers of the law to demonstrate that they were not listening to the most important message in this universe.

In Matthew 14:6 and Mark 6:22, the daughter of Herodias dances for Herod, and it pleases him and his dinner guests so much that he promises with an oath to give her whatever she asked, even up to half of his kingdom. Prompted by her mother, she asks for John the Baptist’s immediate execution. In Luke 15:25 in the parable of the lost son, when the son comes to his senses he returns to open arms and a great celebration of music and dancing. This is an example of how God and his angels rejoice.

So in the New Testament, we see that although dance is used in different settings, the mood is typically one of celebration and praise. It is powerful that Jesus would use dancing in his example of the lost son to illustrate the celebration of a sinner repenting.

Creative Ways We Can Utilize Dance

The dance of the Jewish people was similar to what we today call folk dance. These dances, both corporate and individual, were performed by both men and women. Both group and individual dances were performed. In a biblical sense, it is generally understood as the round dance, an artistic worship response recalling divine victory in battle and the deliverance of the Hebrews, an expression of celebration. It can be used in other ways parallel with these principles.

We as disciples have an even better deliverance, and therefore the best reasons to worship God with dance! We were rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of the Son he loves (Colossians 1:13). We have victory over our enemy Satan! Baptisms and restorations are causes for a grand celebration. We can praise God both publicly and privately. You can dance in your own private time of worship. I’ve had times where I would be worshiping with a song and I would just spontaneously pull my wife in to start dancing as well.

Choirs, part singers and song leaders can do movement to enhance the central message of songs. I once witnessed in the Chicago church the choir and praise team do movement to the song “Lord You’re mighty” by JJ Hairston during a worship concert. Every time they sang “Lord You’re Mighty” all the singers fists pumped twice. It was simple movement, and it was declarative and powerful; in fact, it was one of the things that stuck out to me the most that night. You can teach movement to your congregation. I have seen kingdom dances taught to an entire congregation in the Southern Region of the Boston Church during a Sunday service. People walked away encouraged and empowered to worship God in a different way. Also, dance troupes can offer liturgical dance, ballet, Salsa, folk, Hip-hop, break dance and krump (a street dance popularized in the U.S.). Dancing is not exactly comfortable to many; however it is a legitimate way to worship God. It is a biblical practice to apply in our churches, and does not have to be used in a performance setting.

Using Our Gifts To Serve God's Church

The way art is viewed today is different from how it was viewed in Old Testament times. All forms of artistic expression resonated throughout the Jewish nation. In our times artists are idolized. In Exodus 35:31, Moses speaks of Bezalel, who was filled with Spirit of God. He was an artist who understood that he was just a servant helping out with the Tabernacle. That is the appropriate attitude – we are only servants serving our God, and we have to be passionate about worshiping God in all ways, including the area of dance. Speak with your church leaders about the goals you would like to accomplish. Study out dance through out the Bible and share your observations so that people can share that mindset.