

Our God Dances

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What is dance? “It uses the human body, extends through time, exists through space and flow, accompanied by rhythm, serves to communicate, and its movement has style and form. A dance may or may not be performed before an audience.”¹

The definition of dance comes from my notes on the History of Dance, a summer course that I took at Cerritos College in 1988. The human race has imitated birds, snakes, fish and other animals to learn dances. Are we then to dogmatically state that no animal dances? What of little birds, who seem to playfully dare an oncoming car as they swoop before it, more frequently than not, missing the car? What of the gliding of an eagle, or of trained dogs in their circus choreography, or a strutting male peacock as he spreads his feathers before the female in a courting dance? Or of bees indicating through movement where pollen can be found? Are all their movements with dedicated purpose, perhaps as the Indian rain dances, or are some for amusement? If the thoughtful reader will give me some latitude, I would like to suggest that a human body is not needed to have a dance. All of creation then becomes a choreography full of movement, sound and rhythm, seeking to communicate, existing through time and space, with force, flow, style and form. Even now, as I write in my living room, I hear birds communicating in song. And should I look out the large window, I would see their continuous movement and rhythmic pauses. Hence, I suggest that to dance, a human body is not necessary.

My thesis is this: The Judeo-Christian God is a dancer and pre-dates the supposed ‘first recorded dance in 3000 BC by the Creates.’²

The Bible is a reliable archaeological document accepted by both secular and religious-minded people. Whether a secular man calls the Genesis account of creation folklore, and a religious man calls it doctrine, is not pertinent to this paper. If the Judeo-Christian God dances, He would certainly predate 3000 BC. If a record states God danced before 3000 BC, then that record would make it the oldest recording, or critique, of a dance in times past, even if the critique was recorded at a date later than 3000 BC.

Conservative dating for the writing of the Genesis account is 1450-1410 BC.³ Some challenge that Moses wrote Genesis, but again, that is not the issue here. Whether you choose to call it folklore or doctrine, is your choice. We are examining the thesis of the Judeo-Christian God as a dancer. If a record supports that the Judeo-Christian God danced before man even existed on Earth, this would be the earliest dance known or recorded. “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” (Genesis 1: 2 NKJV)

Rather than to define the ‘Spirit of God’, we can rightly assume from the full text that

the author believed the Spirit of God to have intelligence. Hence, the movement had purpose, choreography, a style and form, existing in flow, force, in space (not a void, but three dimensional, choosing to limit Himself to an area). Existing in time, the Spirit's movement was 'not a single picture' but moved across the water, perhaps accompanied by the rhythmic sounds of the water, therefore the First Dancer. Though the document does not record that the water made sounds, it is likely it did, as the backdrop was that the earth "was without form and void", likely that there had been a great upheaval.

It is also likely that the dance of the Spirit interacted with the water, causing a rhythmic sound. To examine this possibility in further detail, the English word for "move" in Genesis 1:2 is the Hebrew word, rachaph (transliterated into English from the Hebrew). Rachaph means to 'move, shake, flutter'.⁴ The word "upon" in Genesis 1:2 is the Hebrew word, Al (transliterated). This means 'on, upon, above, over'.⁵ We see that the Spirit moved through space, above the waters, yet perhaps at times it moved against the waters, fluttering, hovering, purposely communicating with the water. Perhaps the First Dancer shook the water at times. It was an intelligent force, accompanied by the rhythmic sound of the waters. The First Dancer moved through time that is continuous, through space, three dimensional, fluttering like a bird or dove. With force, the First Dancer interacted with the water, communicating with a style and form of that of a bird, perhaps accompanied by rhythmic sounds of a bird's wings gently fluttering.

Was the dance a performance for others, before an audience? Did angels watch? Did God meet with Moses, as recorded in a reliable archaeological document, and tell Moses about this first dance on earth, or was it folklore? Did the critique specifically tell of how the Spirit fluttered above the waters like a bird? Did God merely tell Moses, or was the experience much more grand than, say, a vision wherewith we 'moderns' equate with a super silver screen projection? Did God have the ability to actually catapult Moses into the past and experience the First Dancer's world?

What does the New Testament or New Covenant say of this matter? "And John bore witness, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained on Him." (John 1:32 NKJV) "Then Jesus, when He had been baptized, came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heaven were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him." (Matthew 3: 16 NKJV)

So two saw the Spirit, Jesus and John the Baptist. I suppose the First Dancer thought a baptism was a good occasion to celebrate and dance. (By this time one shouldn't doubt that the Spirit liked to dance, even if one still has questions about Jesus himself and Jesus' preference. But should you also believe in the Trinity, as I do, you may be putting yourself in a theological quandary if you insist that Jesus did not dance.) The First Dancer again moved through time, that is, continuous through space that is three-dimensional. With the force like a dove and a specific style of the lightness, flowing and landing specifically upon Jesus, perhaps accompanied again with the rhythmic sound of the fluttering of a dove's wings in syncopation with the rippling of the water.

What do we learn from Jesus' behavior? Did He immerse Himself into the culture as a Jewish man? Specifically, did He dance?

Critics are a part of public life; perhaps it makes critics feel more self-assured. Whether critics are right or wrong, their criticism gives a fuller insight into their time and culture. Many criticisms of Jesus are recorded in the Bible.

Let's examine some criticism of Jesus with reference to dance. Did he or didn't he?

Though an argument from silence is not a reliable one, it still can be noted. The Jewish culture of Jesus' day was, and still is a dancing society. Dancing was done many times during holidays and feast days. The emphasis was not on sensuality. You name it, we can believe the Jewish people loved to, and still love to, dance. Now what about the Jewish man, Jesus, for our purposes, the equation of the Christian part of the Judeo-Christian heritage? Did he dance? Remember that critics dogged him.

The Gospel writer, John, records that Jesus went to a wedding, John 2: 1-11. At least one critic was there because the record states that Jesus made some wine to save the groom from embarrassment. Well, the wine was so good, the chief steward, or butler, criticized the groom for serving the best wine after the poorer quality wine. Oi! Well, Jesus escaped criticism this time. But ah, what about our weak argument from silence?

Remember that the ancient Jewish people loved to dance. Jesus is Jewish and that nifty butler had the gall to criticize the groom for putting out the better wine later, knowing that after they had imbibed, then you serve the poor quality wine, after discernment is dulled.

Hmm, here is Jesus, a public figure, at a wedding, trying to save the groom from embarrassment as the groom ran out of wine. Though Jesus is thoughtful of the groom, it would have been very apparent if Jesus did not dance. It is easy to believe at least the nifty butler would have been on Jesus' heels, asking why he wasn't dancing?! "Did the food make you sick, Jesus? What's the matter with you?!" No such criticism is spoken of, perhaps just a weak argument from silence.

What if we could get Jesus' own perspective on dancing? In addressing his critics, Jesus compares himself with his cousin, the ascetic John the Baptist. "And saying: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we mourned to you, and you did not lament.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' But wisdom is justified by her children." (Matthew 11: 17-19 NKJV)

Remember that Jesus was responding to criticism. In other words, Jesus was saying, 'We just can't do anything to please you! Neither enjoying life to its fullest, (with possibly dance as part of that) or the appeal of the lonely ascetic has drawn you to God.' Now this is less than an argument from silence. John the Baptist was out in the desert, an ascetic. Jesus was going to parties. Oh! Excuse me, celebrations, weddings, feast days, out to dinner, etc. The statement was that the method of presentation of the message was the opposite. By Jesus' own implication, in comparison to John the Baptist was that Jesus was dancing, really enjoying life! This is an argument from implication, slightly better than an argument from silence. Need I add that our contemporary definition of party animals would hardly call you a friend if you sat in a corner with a glass of water, never venturing out onto the dance floor? I believe they called Jesus "My friend." just as Jesus' critics said. (Perhaps a disclaimer is necessary here. I am not promoting a lifestyle that you may have been enslaved to. I am promoting the validity of dance as an art form and the validity of those who are called to minister to others wherever that path may lead them by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word. We cannot judge the guidance that the Lord may give another, and it is certainly time that we stop treating dancers like

spiritual second class citizens of the Kingdom, in particular when they may be more in tune with the word of God in this matter than we are.)

Yet also Jesus spoke highly of the Bible using it with the assumption and understanding that it is, and was, the word of God. He quoted frequently from the Psalms, never disclaiming Psalm 149:3 and 150:4, which say: “Let them praise His name with the dance; Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp.” (Psalm 149: 3 NKJV) “Praise Him with the timbrel and dance; Praise Him with stringed instruments and flutes!” (Psalm 150: 4 NKJV)

Apparently, dance was an integral part of Jesus’ society and never once did Jesus think to condemn the discipline and enjoyment of dance. But perhaps for the “called”⁶ spiritual leaders a word of encouragement should be made, and a reminder to those for whom you shepherd. Simply, there must be a choreography of order, an intelligent decision that guides our worship. “Let all things be done for edification.”⁷ that is, to build up. It does not mean that because one does not understand it, or that it runs culturally aside to ourselves that we dismiss it, just as we would not dismiss a psalm or the teaching of the word. The choreography of worship is to be tempered with “submission” (1 Corinthians 14: 34), that is, when the called leaders believe it to be appropriate as to season or place in the worship service. If it is the practice of a local assembly, under the guidance of their shepherds, to believe that any time is appropriate, then that is their right as a local assembly to be free on this peripheral issue. (If we are to identify with the universal body of Christ, then we are not free to choose such things as the essentials of the faith, such as the incarnation of the second person of the Holy Trinity, who bodily died, rose, ascended, and is bodily returning.) Nevertheless, there is always the possibility that we as a church, universal and local, can quench the working of the Holy Spirit. The exhortation to all of us is then, “Let them praise His name with the dance; Let them sing praises to Him with the timbrel and harp.” (Psalm 149: 3)

Our God dances. But if you as I believe in the Trinity, perhaps you still have a cultural puzzle — did Jesus dance?

There was one final dance that Jesus did, that is recorded in the Word. This dance was before an audience. Most were hostile, a few sympathetic. It was a dance of death. He fulfilled the requirements of the contemporary definition of dance. He used a human body, his own. It was three dimensional, existing in space and continuous in time. The dance was released from the center of energy. The style and form was to push, and pull himself forcefully up, with his feet and arms, to take a breath, expelling, and then lowered by gravity. This was done rhythmically, as often as there was a need to breathe, accompanied by sound. It served to communicate, whether by the Roman government or as a fulfillment of prophecy. The dance lasted approximately three hours. The rhythm ended with the words, “It is finished!” He bowed his head, a deliberate choice of action, and he released⁸ — the First Dancer.

Bibliography and Footnotes to Our God Dances

Bibliography to Our God Dances

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2. The New Scofield Reference Bible Oxford University Press, (New York, 1969).
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4. A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. © 1957 by the University of Chicago. Twelfth Impression 1969. The University of Chicago Press.

Footnotes to Our God Dances

- ¹ Class notes, Kathy Meyer, MA Cerritos College, Cerritos, California. History of Dance, June 1988.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ The New Scofield Reference Bible Oxford University Press, (New York, 1969). Page 1.
- ⁴ Robert Young, Young's Analytical Concordance Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc. (Grand Rapids, Mich.) Page 39.
- ⁵ Ibid. Pages 1017 and 2.
- ⁶ Romans 1: 1 "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God." (NKJV)
- ⁷ "How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification." (1 Corinthians 14: 26 NKJV)
- ⁸ "gave up" parédwken from paradidwmi. Transliterated into English: paradidomi. "gave up" "1. hand over, give (over), deliver, entrust. John 19: 30 he gave up his spirit voluntarily." A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature by William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich. © 1957 by the University of Chicago. Twelfth Impression 1969. The University of Chicago Press. Page 619.

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