

CHAPTER NO.II

D A N C E - I N C H R I S T I A N I T Y

The impulse or urge to unite with God through dance has a long and involved history. It is found in the animism and dynamism of primitive people, in the Gods of Egypt, Greece, Rome, India and finally in the God of Christianity. Here, the religion of Sacred Dance "becomes a sacrificial rite, a charm, a prayer and prophetic vision. It summons and dispels the forces of nature, heals the sick, links the dead to the chain of their descendants; it assures sustenance and luck in the chase, victory in battle; it blesses the fields and the tribe. It is creator, preserver, steward and guardian".⁽¹⁾ Dance has a very prominent place in the Christian Scriptures. A Christian does experience God and understand Him in dance. Christian religious traditions and the history of the Church are living examples that dance has been part and parcel of the Christian life. Finally, Christian theology can be elucidated in the form of dance.

DANCE IN THE CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURES:

Christian Scriptures are divided into two sections, the Sacred Books written before Christ called The Old Testament and the writing that followed the birth of Christ called The New Testament. The New Testament is the continuation and fulfilment of the Old Testament. The Jews of course follow only the Old Testament.

DANCE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:

An elaborate description, use, benefit and purpose of dance has been frequently referred to and mentioned in the Old Testament. There are instances of group dances and individual dances to be found here.

GROUP DANCES:

The Hebrew word for dance in the Old Testament is in its various forms; Machol, Mecholah and Chul (Chul being the infinitive). These forms denote the same group circle dances and are translated by Xopos in the Greek Septuagint

and Chorea in the Latin Vulgate.⁽²⁾ All these terms refer to and mean that dance was performed by a group circling and not solo dancers.⁽³⁾ In this form of group dance, movements by the individuals could be either wild or graceful. The tendency in Jewish circles had been to accept a wide range of even awkward individual movements within the group; but the priestly traditions in both the Jewish and Christian circles have tended to impose standards of some individual grace or at least group harmony in such dancing.⁽⁴⁾

MACHOL:

Machol in Hebrew is translated by Xopos in the Greek Septuagint which has its equivalent Chorea in Latin Vulgate. In the following passages of the Scriptures the Hebrew word Machol is used to denote dance and is used in many places.

" You have changed my sadness into a joyful dance;

You have taken away my sorrow and surrounded me with joy.

So I will not be silent; I will sing praise to you,

Lord, you are my God; I will give you thanks for ever."

(Ps. 30. 11-12)

In the above Psalm the Psalmist identifies and expresses happiness with a joyful dance.

Giving thanks and praising God in dance and music must have occurred frequently as a normal form of worship.

"Praise his name with dancing,

Play drums and harps in praise of Him."

(Ps.149:3)

"Praise God in his Temple!

Praise his strength in heaven!

Praise him for mighty things he has done

Praise his supreme greatness,

Praise him with trumpets.

Praise him with harps and lyres

Praise him with drums and dancing

Praise him with harps and flutes.

Praise him with cymbals

Praise the Lord, all living creatures".

(Ps.150)

The above Psalm⁽⁵⁾ explicitly mentions that dance was performed in the temple. The details of the instruments used i.e. trumpet, harp, lyre, drum, flute and cymbal are also clearly described.

"Happiness has gone out of our lives;

Grief has taken the place of our dances".

(Im.5:15

The book of Lamentation⁽⁶⁾ is a collection of five poems lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and its aftermath of ruin and exile. These poems are used by the Jews in worship on the annual days of fasting and mourning which commemorate the national disaster of 586 B.C. The above verses from the books of Lamentation are found in the 5th section " a Prayer for Mercy", which is a clear indication that dance was a part and parcel of the Jewish religious life.

"Once again I will rebuild you.

Once again you will take up your tamborines and
dance joyfully" (Jr. 31:4)

"Then the girls will dance and be happy and men, young and old will rejoice. I will comfort them and turn their mourning into joy, their sorrow into gladness."

(Jr.31:13)

This book is the account of what was said by Prophet Jeremiah, son of Hilkiah, one of the priests of the town of Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. In these above dances, the communal nature of the dance is explicitly stated where worship is involved. The dance was accompanied by music and the dancers often carried tambourines.

MECHOLAH:

Mecholah in Hebrew also means the circular group dance which is found in many passages of the sacred scriptures. "Prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister took her tambourine, and all the women followed her, playing tambourines and dancing" (Ex.15:20). The word Exodus means 'departure' and refers to the most important event in Israel's history, which is described in this book-the departure of the people of Israel from Egypt, where they

had been slaves. The dance reference occurs in the section - the Covenant Tent and instructions for worship. In the above verses (Ex.15:20) Miriam worships and praises God together with her companions. There is another incident where prophet Moses gets angry for the mis-use of dance by his people. " When Moses came close enough to the camp to see the bull-calf and to see the people dancing, he became furious". (Ex.32:19)

In the book of Judges, we find; " When Jephthah went back home to Mizpah, there was his daughter coming out to meet him, dancing and playing the tambourine"(Jg.11:34) and again in the concluding chapter there is another reference: "the girls of Shilon came out to dance during the feast in the vineyard. (Jg.21:21) These references are an expression of joy and are connected to the social life of the people.

In the book of Samuel I, dance takes place on various occasions, both religious and social functions. The existence and use of dance among the prophets in their religious worship is beautifully described. It was dance which took them to an exstatic state by the spirit of God. The approval and need of such dance and the transformation that it would bring is made clear from the advice given by Samuel to Saul: "At the entrance to the town you(Saul) will meet a group of prophets coming down from the altar on the hill, playing harps, drums, flutes and lyres. They will be dancing and shouting. Suddenly the Spirit of the Lord will take control of you, and you will become a different person". (I Sam. 10:5-6)

In the following verses the change in the person of Saul is compared to that of a prophet. " When Saul and his servant arrived at Gibeah, a group of prophets met him. Suddenly the spirit of God took control of him, and he joined in their ecstatic dancing and shouting. People who had known him before, saw him doing this and asked one

another, what has happened to the son of Kish? Has Saul become a prophet?.... When Saul finished his ecstatic dancing and shouting, he went to the altar on the hill".

(I Sam 10:10-13)

In the chapter (I Sam 19:18ff) another of Saul's meeting with such a dancing group of prophets is described. In this account the loss of self-consciousness in dancing is obvious in the uninhibited nakedness of Saul and others. " As he was going there, the Spirit of God took control of him (Saul) also (the previous verses mention the ecstatic dance of Samuel, David and Saul's messengers in progress) and he danced and shouted all the way to Naioth. He took off his clothes and danced and shouted in Samuel's presence, and lay naked all that day and all that night. (This is how the saying originated) Has even Saul become a prophet"? (I Sam 19:23-24)

In this context, prophesying implies dancing. (7)

" The conduct of Saul with the prophets (I Sam 10:10ff,

19:20ff) suggest that the companions called sons of the prophets conducted cultic worship of songs and dance".⁽⁸⁾

The celebration of victory in war was celebrated in dance: "As David was returning after killing Goliath and as the soldiers were coming back home, women from every town in Israel came out to meet King Saul. They were singing joyful songs, dancing and playing tambourines and lyres". (I Sam 18:6) There are two more instances in the same book where David and his works are praised in dance. ⁽⁹⁾

CHUL:

Chul is another Hebrew word, infinitive of such nouns as Machol and Mecholah, the terms usually used for dance in the Old Testament.⁽¹⁰⁾ In the book of Judges, dance was a vintage festival⁽¹¹⁾ where women danced during that time in the vineyard (Jg 21:21, 21:23). In these above instances the word Chul is used for group dances.

In all the above passages of the Scriptures, dance is taken to be performed in groups both in the religious and social life of the people. This communal dancing in worship is true to the earliest prophetic practices, the later Talmudic and Midrashic vision of man's coming to God, and the whole history of Hebranic practice. The early prophetic practice is reported in I Samuel 10:5 where dancing is carried out in a band.⁽¹²⁾ The word for 'band' (hebel) means rope which suggests the connectedness of those dancing.⁽¹³⁾

INDIVIDUAL DANCES:

It is evident from the survey made on the Scriptures that most of the dances are communal or performed in groups. However, there are a few instances where individual dances are referred to. The Hebrew word used for these are Karar and Ragad translated Oprounevov in the Greek and Saltatio in the Latin and indicate an individual circling and jumping. ⁽¹⁴⁾

KARAR:

Karar is found only in one instance where King David dances in the temple to honour the Lord. " David wearing only a linen cloth around his waist, danced with all his might to honour the Lord. And all the Israelites took the Covenant Box upto Jerusalem with shouts of joy and the sound of trumpets. As the Box was being brought into the city, Michal, Saul's daughter, looked out of the window and saw King David dancing and jumping around in the sacred dance". (II Sam 6:14-16)

Further in the same episode when Michal criticises David for his dance, he answers: " I was dancing to honour the Lord and I will go on dancing to the Lord". (II Sam 6:21) The dance which David performed before the ark is described by the word (Karar) which does not occur elsewhere; it must have been unusually vigorous to judge from the criticism of Michal. (15)

Some authors like J.R.Porter and Doug Adams hold that this dance of David was not to God but was a sexual dance.⁽¹⁶⁾ However, circumstances leading to the dance, the venue and the explanation given by David (II Sam Ch.VI) for his vigorous dance are self-explanatory and speak volumes for the religious motive and nature of the dance.

RAQAD: (Opxounvos in Greek and Saltatio in Latin)

This word in Hebrew is found in many passages of the Bible to denote the individual dances. Sam.I Ch.15:29 speaks about "David dancing and leaping for joy". Job 21:11 speaks of the "Children run and play like lambs and dance to the music of harps and flutes". The philosopher⁽¹⁷⁾ in the Ecclesiastes sees that there is a time for everything under heaven, which takes place at the moment God chooses. "the time for mourning and the time for dancing" (Ec. 3:4)

Communal dancing or group dancing has been more in practice than the individual dance according to Old Testament. Throughout the history of the Jews the shape of dances has been conditioned by the desire to have all caught up in the community.

"Dancing, however, was not so much a personal pleasure but a means of rousing the enthusiasm of the assembled company. Hence gesticulations, violent leaps and bounds, hopping in a circle rather than graceful pose or soft rhythmic movements, characterised the Jewish Dances both of ancient and medieval times". (18) The Jewish community lived as group, was delivered from the bondage as a group, suffered and rejoiced in a group. Hence they laid more stress on group dance rather than individual dance.

EVIDENCE OF GROUP AND INDIVIDUAL DANCING IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Testament true to its deepest understanding and continuity of the Old Testament has supported group dance in worship (Xopos or Chorea) and has suppressed the individual dance (Opxounevos or Saltatio). In the parable of Prodigal son, group dance (Xopos) accompanies the return of the son to his father; " In the meantime the older son was out in the field. On his way back, when he came close to the house he heard music and dancing" (Lk. 15:25). This return of son to his father is paradigmatic of worship and is a clear instance of the Xopos kind of dance. (19)

There are some references to individual dancing (Opxounevos) too: Under this category we find non-worshipful dance in the person of Salome before King Herod. (Mt.14:6 and Mk. 6:22)

As a Jew, dance must have been a natural part of Jesus' life as his occasional references indicate:

" We played wedding music for you but you would not dance" (Mt. 11:17) " We have piped unto you, and you have not danced" (Lk. 7:34). Doug Adams is of the opinion that in the preceeding passage, " Christ is not calling for the people to dance individual dances; rather " this generation " acted like the children in the market-place expecting such a performance. This passage deals not with a call to individual dance, but rather with false expectations and the resulting errors in judging others"(20)

This understanding of Christianity is partial. In the Christian theology, Jesus' relation to us is not to be considered only community oriented, it is also personal. Hence, personal worship and expression of faith in Christ is to be expressed and realised and not to be overlooked. The individual's relationship to Jesus is compared to that of a vine and its branches. (Jn. 15:5)

BIBLICAL SYNONYMS OF FESTIVAL REJOICE AND DANCE:

Dance played a significant role in the Jewish religious festivals. " The Hebrew word for festival 'Chagag' originally meant circle dance performed around a sacred altar or sanctuary. This circle dance must have been such a principal or customary feature of these festivals and was in the form of either a processional or a closed circular formation". (21) The feast of Passover is one of the most ancient feasts of the Jews celebrated while they were still nomads. It was a spring-time festival. The Passover is 'Pesach' which is assumed to have been derived from the leaping of the Lord at the initiation of Exodus (Ex.12:11ff). (22) The Hebrew word 'Pesach' originally referred to a certain sacred 'limping' dance which was performed around the sacrificial offerings. (23) This dance must have derived from the prophets of Baal (I Kg. 18:28). Sukkos and Shovans, two harvest festivals were full of religious songs and dances in the ritual sacrifices. Sukkos, later was called Feast of the Tabernacle

which had a spectacular display of religious dances where men of Jerusalem performed the ritual torch dances and the women remained as spectators.⁽²⁴⁾ Religious dance was a part and parcel of the religious festivals in their celebration and sacrificial rituals,

FESTIVAL-REJOICE-DANCE

Examples of explicit connection with dancing and rejoicing is clear in Old Testament. When the Israelites were delivered from Egypt, Miriam, the prophetess, led the women out with Timbrels and dancing. She praised God and rejoiced in the victory (Ex.15:20ff). Young girls danced and rejoiced at the feast of the Lord (Jg.21:19-21), there was rejoicing at the feast of the harvest(Ex.23:16). In the greeting of Saul after David's victories over the Philistines, Joy (Simchah) is associated with dancing (Mecholah) (I Sam 18:6). Simchah is again associated with Machol in Psalm 30:11, and mourning is explicitly contrasted to dancing: " Thou has turned my mourning into

dancing; thou hast put off my sack cloth, and girded me with gladness". (25) The same approach could be seen in Jeremiah 31:13; Lamentation 5:15 and Ecclesiastes where to dance is to rejoice.

The same idea is continued in the New Testament. The Gospel to be shared when introducing dance is found in Luke - 6:23; " Rejoice and leap for joy". In Aramic which Jesus spoke, the word for 'rejoice' is the word for 'dance'. (26) Dancing, for a Jew was coming back to joy and expressing it ; hence "leap for joy". That, at the time of Jesus, dance was understood by a Jew as being the means to rejoice, is suggested in the Gospel according to Mathew 5:12 and Luke 6:23. Doug Adams (27) says that, " at the time of Jesus, dancing was still a literal part of rejoicing and feasting as indicated by his parables of the Return of the Prodigal Son to the Father where the great joy and feasting included in the celebrations. (Lk.15:25). The same idea and attitude towards dance is carried on to a

great extent in the Christian tradition especially in the early life of the church.

JESUS AS THE LORD OF DANCE:

Conceptualizing God as the supreme dancer is quite familiar to the Indian mind, whereas it is apparently not normal to the Christian concept of God. However, if one gives careful thought to the Old Testament, New Testament and to the Christian tradition, this idea does not appear foreign to Christianity. " Dancing has been used in Christian worship to reveal God and those close to God as active, as well as to help people identify themselves with this active moving God through their own movement. This identification through movement was used to increase the people's Christian intentions and transform these intentions into action".(28)

Throughout the Old Testament God is envisioned as the one who is continually moving and leading Israelite movement and actions. " He leaps at the initiation of the

exodus and leads the people through the wilderness. God's ark moves and leads the people into battle in the conquest of the promised land. Later Jewish writers characterized many of God's acts for Israel as dance: the dance of the angels before Jacob as he left Laban and faced danger, the dance provided by the ancestors at the opening of the red sea, the dance provided for Elisha in the incidents in II Kg.6:15ff and the dance to be provided by the Lord in the time to come". (29)

Prophet Zephaniah boldly proclaimed that in the Messianic times God himself would dance in the midst of his people. " On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: Fear not O Zion, be not discouraged; The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a mighty Saviour. He will exult with Joy over you, he will renew you by his love; he will dance with shouts of joy for you as on a day of festival". (Zeph. 3:16-18) (30)

In the New Testament Jesus is familiar with dancing as we see from his frequent references to dance. We have already seen that the word 'Rejoice' meant dance in the Aramic, the language which Jesus assumed to have spoken. The account of Jesus rejoicing in the spirit (Luke 10:21) gives us a picture of Jesus himself dancing. Because at that time dancing was a part of Jewish Worship and social life. (31)

Lucian and Gloria say that Christian tradition seems to enjoy calling Jesus "Choreographer" to indicate him as the leader of the dance, just as we today often inter-change choreographer and premier danseur as synonymous. (32) " There was a time" writes Gregory of Nyssa (+394), "when the chorus of the spiritual creatures was only one chorus, all looking to the one and only choreographer and manifesting in their dance only the harmony decreed by Him". (33)

Gnostic hymns address Jesus as the dancing figure.

Jesus commands his followers, " answer to my dancing. See thyself in Me who speak and dancing what I do...." (34)

In the work of 14th century, Wycliff pictures Christ as one who "led the dance of love".(35) The hymns of the 15th century Hildesheim mass contribute to this dynamic vision:

Lord Jesus dances first of all

He leads the bride by the hand

He it is who jubilates

Jubilus is his name

Blessed he who jubilates

The soul grows warm in memory

And filled with heavenly food. (36)

Recently Sydney Carter has visualised the birth, life mission, passion, death and resurrection of Christ in terms of dance and dance-activity.

"Dance then wherev'er you may be

I am the Lord of the Dance said he

And I'll lead you all wherev'er you may be

And I'll lead you all in the Dance said he.

I danced in the morning when the world was begun
And I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun,
And I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

I danced for the scribe and the pharisee
But they would not dance and they would not follow me
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John,
They came with me and the dance went on.
I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame,
The Holy people said it was a shame,
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me high
And they left me there on a cross to die.

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone
But I am the dance and I still go on.
They cut me down and I leap up high
I am the Life that'll never, never die
I'll live in you if you'll live in me
I am the Lord of the Dance said he.

Here, the word 'dance' stands for actions of Christ as creative and redemptive. Jesus is truly the Lord of Dance, the dancing prophet who danced his way through and communicated his message in and through his body. It was God who in Jesus Christ made the first move to make contact with mankind. In the fullness of time, he communicated His very self to mankind (Heb. 1-2) and the Word was made flesh (Jn.1:14).

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