

My husband and I have our roots in traditional protestant Christianity. My background is Methodist and my husband's Church of Christ. We both began attending Sabbath/Holy Day keeping congregations with our parents when we were 16. In 1979 we married and continued to attend the same Sabbath/Holy Day keeping congregation until the Spring of 1995 – our sons were 13 and 15.

A characteristic of our early childhood church culture was the tendency to stifle (control) the expression of any type of emotion in the worship service. In the Church of Christ, musical accompaniment was not allowed in the worship service ... no organ, no piano, no nothing. Everyone sang acappella. In the Methodist Church that I attended as a child, we did at least have piano accompaniment. We would have had an organ if the congregation could afford it.

Compared to those, our most recent church was probably more “musically” permissive than either of our childhood ones. Our song service normally included a piano accompaniment, and on occasion band instruments were also included. But that was the extent of the emotion. One dared not raise his hands in worship, nor clap his hands in exultation to a very moving song.

Based on your own church culture, many of you can identify with this, but is this what YHVH intended? Did God intend for His people to have a very stoic type of worship and praise? If not, why has that become the norm – at least in many Christian denominations? Did God put worship in this “Controlled Box”?

In this message, I want to briefly show what many of you have already come to understand. The worship of God was never intended to be stoic. Instead the Bible shows that from the earliest days of Him working with His people, they would praise Him in the dance. What happened that caused that to end? Why do church leaders believe that the worship of God should be more “restrained”? We'll see what brought that about, and then see that it's prophesied for the dance to return to the worship and praise of God.

Many of you are familiar with the Biblical concept of dance in worship, so let's begin by rehearsing a few places where dance is mention or alluded to in scripture. You will recall that Miriam danced in praise when God saved the Israelites from Pharaoh's army -

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 15:20-21** “Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a tambourine in her hand, and all the women went out after her with tambourines and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: “Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.”

Another example of women dancing was when Saul and David returned from a battle with the Philistines -

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Samuel 18:6-7** As they were coming home, when David returned from striking down the Philistine, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they celebrated, "Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

In both of these cases, the Hebrew word that was translated “dancing” is “mechowlah” (Strong's #4246) which is the feminine form of the word “mechow” (Strong's #4234). “Mehow” is the noun form of the Hebrew root word “chowl” (Strong's #2342 – pronounced ‘khool’). “Chowl” means to “twist, whirl, dance”, but also means to “writhe, tremble, travail”. Why such diverse meanings? Because in Hebrew, the root word oftentimes derives its meaning from the observed action. From a distance, a person who is dancing might also look like a person suffering from great pain, therefore the meaning is based on the context.



The Greek equivalent of “chuwł” is “choros” (Strong’s #5525) which means “a band of dancers and singers, a circular dance”. “Choros” is the root word for our many English words including “chorus” and “choir” since all three words (dance, chorus, and choir) share the same meaning of doing something in unison.

Another Greek word that is translated “dance” is “orcheomai” (Strong’s #3738). It comes from the root word “orchos” (not used in the Bible) which means “a row or a ring”. “Orchos” is the root of the word “orchestra” in that the orchestra occupied part of the area in front of a stage that was reserved for the dancers.<sup>1</sup>

In the Old Testament, ‘orcheomai’ is equivalent to two Hebrew words: “karar” (Strong’s #3769) and “raqad” (Strong’s #7540), both of which mean to “skip, leap, whirl, and dance”. An example of “karar” is when King David brought the Ark of the Covenant into the City of David –

<sup>ESV</sup> **2 Samuel 6:16** As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal the daughter of Saul looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before the LORD, and she despised him in her heart.

Another word that implies dancing is from the Hebrew word that is oftentimes translated “festival” as in the biblical festivals of Leviticus 23. That word is “chagag” (Strong’s #2287). “Chagag” means “to hold a feast, make a pilgrimage, celebrate, dance, and stagger”. Though it usually implies a festival, it is also translated “dance” as it is when David rescued his wives from the Amalekites -

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Samuel 30:16** And when he had taken him down, behold, they (*the Amalekites*) were spread abroad over all the land, eating and drinking and dancing (*chagag*), because of all the great spoil they had taken from the land of the Philistines and from the land of Judah.

“Chagag” is the verbal root of the noun “chag” (Strong’s #2282) which usually means “a feast”, but also implies a “circle”. “Chag” is a masculine word, but it has a feminine ‘cousin’ which is “chagah” (Strong’s #2283). “Chagah” means “terror, a reeling”, which is much like the negative meaning of the word “chuwł” (see above), but if you look at what Strong’s claims its origin to be, it says “from an unused root meaning to revolve”.

Another example of “chag” implying a “circle” is in Job 26:10. In Hebrew, words that sound the same (though spelled differently) oftentimes mean the same. Such is the Hebrew word “chuwg” (Strong’s #2328) which is a root word that means “to encircle, encompass, describe a circle” and other terms implying a circle. Here is how it is translated -

<sup>ESV</sup> **Job 26:10** He has inscribed a circle on the face of the waters at the boundary between light and darkness.

One of the most clear connections between a “chag” and dancing is the example of the golden calf. As the people demanded a replacement for Moses, Aaron took it upon himself to make a golden calf which he claimed was the image of the god that led them out of Egypt. After it was made, Aaron built an alter in front of it and said -

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 32:5** ..."Tomorrow shall be a feast (*chag*) to the LORD."

So Aaron proclaimed a feast, one that would be like one of God’s festivals, and as Moses made his way down the mountain and neared the camp, scripture says that -

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 32:19** “... as soon as he came near the camp and saw the calf and the dancing (*mechowlah*), Moses’ anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets out of his hands and broke them at the foot of the mountain.”

<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orchestra>; [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek\\_chorus](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_chorus)



Some might say that since dancing took place as worship before the golden calf, we should not do as they did, but to say that would imply that we should also refrain from observing a “chag”. Never-the-less, many scholars understand that “chag” implies a festival with dancing. In its commentary on the word “chag”, the Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon<sup>2</sup> makes this statement in regards to the God-ordained biblical festivals –

“... apparently always of the three great pilgrim feasts, celebrated by processions and dancing”

In other words, all the Biblical festivals were celebrated with processions and dancing. They were to be a time to rejoice in song and dance, which would certainly include circle dancing. Besides being a part of the festival, the Psalms indicate that dancing is to be part of everyday praises to YHVH. A number of passages tie praise to dance:

<sup>ESV</sup> **Psalm 150:4** Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe!

<sup>ESV</sup> **Psalm 149:3** Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!

These passages combined with the following verse –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Psalm 22:3** Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises<sup>1</sup> of Israel.

- might cause you to wonder if YHVH is enthroned in the praises of Israel – would His dwelling place be the Dance? Indeed something to ponder, but more importantly, if the Genesis 1:3 statement by God to “Let there be light” is a commandment, would the statement to “let them praise his name with dancing” also be taken as a commandment?

The Old Testament is not the only place we see instructions pertaining to dance. Messiah Yeshua had a few things to say about dancing as well. In fact, His words imply that dancing is considered to be the normal way of expressing Joy; a way of life! Speaking to his disciples about His generation, he said –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 11:17** "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.

What Yeshua was saying is that the people were not properly responding to the words of those who had been sent to them, specifically John the Baptist. He likens the them to children who do not follow the normal response when hearing the joyful sound of a flute. The normal response – according to Yeshua – is to dance.

Another example is found in the parable of the prodigal son. When the wayward son repented and returned to his father’s house, the father responded by holding a feast. The father says to his servants –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Luke 15:22-24** But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

In the midst of the celebration, the brother returns, and it says that he heard “music and dancing”. According to Yeshua, music and dancing was part of the celebration. Apparently, music and dance was a normal part of celebration in His day, otherwise, why would He say it?

In her book “The Whole Man at Worship: The Actions of Man Before God” by Helene de Lencal, the author describes the intensity with which the Israelites expressed and celebrated before God. Being that Hebrew is an action language, it’s easy to see how the author came to her conclusion. She says –

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<sup>2</sup> BDB – page 291 top-left



“ . . . **Israel maintained a personal relationship with God**, and even as one human being communicates with another thru the whole of himself, by thoughts, emotions, words, movements, and tones of voice, so **the people of the Bible employ their whole selves in their communication with their God . . .** “

“**Easily moved and passionate, exuberant and impulsive**, they express their feelings in a way which modern ‘civilized’ man may well find flamboyant. Struck down by misfortune, they weep, bewail themselves, **they tear out the hair of their beards**, rend their garments and roll on the ground; in times of joy, **they leap in the air, clap their hands, cry out, laugh and sing like children**, and both their lamentations **and** their shouts of happiness are addressed to God.”  
(emphasis mine)

Her phrase “they leap in the air” is likely a reference to the story of David bringing the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, where many translators rendered the Hebrew word “raqad” as “danced”. So dance was definitely part of the “Biblical” culture, a culture where the primary form of worship was praise to God through action – both singing and dancing.

Being that dance was part of the Hebrew culture from the time of the patriarchs through the time of the apostles, why is dance oftentimes shunned in many Christian denominations? Why is this expression of Joy not allowed in praise and worship?

Let’s examine the history of dance from the time of Yeshua up to about 100 years ago.

### What Happened to the Dance?

After the death of Yeshua, the believing Jews continued to worship alongside their non-believing Jewish brothers. In time, non-Jewish proselytes joined the Yeshua-believing community and became a part of the synagogue as well<sup>3</sup>. In time, the believers (both Jew and non-Jew) were kicked out of the synagogue just as Yeshua had predicted<sup>4</sup> and they began to assemble in homes, and because they were meeting in homes, there was an obvious lack of space, and they began to exchange the “action” aspect of Hebrew worship for a more “Greek” way by spiritualizing the concrete Hebrew thoughts and actions into abstract thought. They exchanged the weekly breaking of bread that was part of a group fellowship meal that included dancing and study, for the Catholic “eucharist” – a part of the “mass” that focused attention on an individual instead of the entire group.

Never-the-less, dance continued as part of the worship by the early believers on into the second century. In his book “Liturgies of the Western World”, Brad Thompson states that both Justin Martyr (A.D. 150) and Hippolytus (A.D. 200) described joyful circle dances as part of the early Christian ‘church’, but noted that the focus was beginning to change. The people continued to stray from their “Hebrew” culture toward a more “catholic” culture, and instead of the people simply dancing as a group, they began to emphasize a leader or a central figure in the dance.

This point is illustrated in a quote from the apocryphal “Acts of John”<sup>5</sup> where you can find the words of “The Hymn of Jesus”, a song depicting some of the events of the “Last Supper”. The words go like this –

“Now before He was taken by The lawless Jews. He gathered us together and said, “Before I am delivered up unto them let us sing a hymn....And we going around in a ring, answered him: Amen. I would be saved... Grace danceth...dance you all, ... The whole on high hath part in our dancing ... A door am I to you that knocks ... answer you unto my dancing ....”

<sup>3</sup> Acts 15:21

<sup>4</sup> John 16:2

<sup>5</sup> according to Wikipedia, “ a set of stories about John the Apostle that began circulating in written form as early as the second century AD. Translations of the "Acts of John" in modern languages have been reconstructed by scholars from a number of manuscripts of later date.



The steps to this “dance” have been lost but the focus remains in that the circle had as its central point a center person - in this case “Jesus” - whose power was suppose to radiate to those standing in the circle.

Going on to the third century we see evidence that the dance was continuing to degenerate. There again, instead of the people dancing together as a group in praise to God, individuals would associate dance with prayer and with initiation into the church. Dancing became a part of baptism. The individual would “dance his way” to the baptismal basin.

Clement in his “Stromata” mentions the prevalent custom of bodily movement in prayer –

“Therefore we raise our heads and our hands to heaven in prayer, and move our feet just at the end of the prayer . . . we seek by words of prayer to raise our body above the earth and uplift the winged soul by its desire for better things.”<sup>6</sup>

And, most significantly when a person was initiated into ‘the Church’ – it was quite often welcomed with dancing, torches and song.

While dance was changing in “the Church” it was also changing in Imperial Rome. Dance in the church was becoming more of an individual worship, while in the Roman society; it was becoming theatrical and decadent. The conflict between the “proper” use of the dance in “the church” and its degenerate use in Roman society led to conflict over the use of the dance in worship, and since the church was becoming an institution of the Roman government; it began to play a major role as the arbitrator of morality, education, and social structure.

This led to the church beginning to control dance in worship ... If you wanted to dance it had to be done under the strict guidance of “the church”. In the book “Dance in Christian Worship, the author<sup>7</sup> shows that by the fourth century, dance was falling more and more under the authority of the church. After quoting St. Ambrose, one of the most influential ecclesiastical figures of the fourth century, he wrote –

“Ambrose felt that those who view church dance must view the actions “under the aspect of holy religion.” Then the dance will become truly reverential . . .”

Thus dance fell more and more under the auspices of “the church”.

Skipping down to the ninth century, the church became more authoritarian in its activities and the idea of the church as a judicial institution began to outweigh the concept of the church as a community. As a result, the church gained more and more control over the dance. Instead of it being the spontaneous expression of joy, it became a part of the regular liturgical service and procession. During this period, there were over 18 different “councils” relating to dance. For example:

- The Council of Lessinas (743 AD) – Forbid laymen to dance in “choir” dances
- The Council of Rome (826 AD) – forbid women to sing or perform in “choir” dances
- Pope Leo IV (850 AD) ordered that women not dance or sing in churches or porches

In addition to those restrictions, there was the requirement that the church service would be done in Latin. Since most of the people could not speak Latin, the membership began to evolve into two groups – the Latin-speaking leaders (the ‘clergy’) and the rest of the people (the ‘lay-members’). The clergy performed the mass, and therefore all the dance was performed by the clergy; and because the choir sang at the mass, the lay-member simply became a spectator.

By the Medieval Period (1100 – 1400 AD) it became evident that excluding the “laity” from participation in the church service brought about a decrease in interest and attendance at mass. In an attempt to rectify

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<sup>6</sup> “Dance In Christian Worship; Ronald Gagne, Thomas Kane, and Robert VerEecke; 1984; Pastoral Press; Washington, DC; pg.45

<sup>7</sup> Ibid; pg. 40



the situation, efforts were made to reverse the previous edicts and actually encourage the people to dance. The leaders began to include more choral songs, picturesque processions, and even ceremonial dances performed in the choir area.

Pope Urban IV (1261 AD) instituted the “Corpus Cristi Procession” to celebrate the “presence of Christ in the Eucharist” where all the people in town were expect to dance and sing in this procession. This struggle to make church “more enjoyable and appealing” to the laypeople caused the dance to continue its shift from being devotional to becoming theatrical and dramatic. This caused a problem for church leaders who had previously reined in the dance because it had become theatrical and dramatic.

One of darkest periods for the dance was during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this period, the “Danse Macabre” or “Dance of Death” came on the scene. Portrayed mostly through paintings and satirical plays, the “Dance of Death” was a way to illustrate the commonality of people in death. As part of the theatre, actual dances took place with mimes depicting the dead actually dragging individual from their daily activities down to the grave. Though such ‘dances’ were not a part of the church service, the concept did make its way into many sermons. Because of these repulsive ‘dances’, the church began to denounce all form of dance, even sacred-liturgical dance, and eventually pushed dance out of the church all together.

By the Renaissance Period, the god-honoring expression of worship which started as Hebrew dance had now shifted to liturgical, functional movements. Dance had for all practical purposes, ended within the church.

The advent of the printing press brought enormous changes to the church. It gave the “laity” the ability to read the Bible in their own language. They no longer had to rely on the clergy to tell them what the Bible said, and as the laity became more knowledgeable in matters pertaining to the Bible, they began to rebel against the Catholic church.

Most notably, the Protestant Reformation, led by Martin Luther, caused many “Protestant” churches to be formed. Protestants opposed the services of the Catholic mass, even looking at the movements of the Catholic priests as “dance”, thus in opposition to the Catholic church, the Protestant leaders declared all forms of dance “sinful and not biblical”; and forbid all forms of dance.

What movements did the protestant leaders dislike? In his book “The Mass in Slow Motion”<sup>8</sup>, Ronald Knox explains –

“The twisting and turning, and bobbing and bowing, and lifting and parting and rejoining his hands, which the priest goes through in the course of the Mass, really add up to a kind of dance, meant to express a religious idea to you, the spectators.”

Ironically, the Protestant leaders adopted many of these same movements themselves, ones they had previously condemned in the Catholic church. From this time forward, various prohibitions, edicts, and mandates were enacted to completely snuff out the dance. Never-the-less, there were periods where localized dance in worship flourished.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> the “Shakers” came to America from England. They were Protestants who believed in communal living and who opposed procreation, but had a reputation of dancing beautifully before God. Their dancing appeared to be pure and in harmony with scripture, but due to their view on procreation, their numbers continued to decline and they soon faded away.

Another group that began to restore the dance was Hasidic Judaism. Sylvia Barack Fishman, a professor of contemporary Jewish life at Brandeis University says,

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<sup>8</sup> “The Mass in Slow Motion”; Ronald Knox; 1948; Sheed & Ward, Inc.; pg.3



“the idea of joyous prayer, singing, dancing and spiritual feelings became an alternate route to Jewish excellence”.

The Hasidic worship continues to involve music and dance in a celebratory and joyous mood.

In 1860, the Hebrew Christian Alliance was formed in Britain to bring together Jewish Christians from various denominations. Jewish believers within the historic Protestant churches were seeking to reclaim their Jewish identity. Years later, the MJAA (an acronym for Messianic Jewish Alliance Association) was founded. In order to express their Jewish identity in worship and to maintain their links with their families and the Jewish community, they adopted the title, Messianic Jews. They believe dance plays an important role in uniting Jewish and Gentile believers. Well known artists, like Paul Wilbur, Jonathan Settel, Joel Chernoff and Marty Goetz perform at their many events.

With 1948 paving the way for the Jews to return back to their home land in Israel, a large number of Jews returned to the land with their faith in the Messiah, and with the reunification of Jerusalem through the Six Day War of 1967, the Hebrew Christians believed this to be a fulfillment of Luke 21:24 where Yeshua said . . .

“Jerusalem will be trodden down by the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled”

There was a renewed sense of entering a new phase in these “Last days” with Jerusalem under Israeli control.

The Messianic Jewish Movement identified strongly with the prophetic biblical promises to Israel whose culture is steeped in the dance. Murray Silberling wrote a book in 1995 titled *Dancing for Joy*. On page 23, he says -

“A major component of the Messianic revival involves the restoration of sacred dance . Sometimes called Messianic or Davidic worship, the Messianic movement has led the way in the choreography, teaching and development of various forms of dance. They incorporated many elements of traditional Hasidic dance, as well as Israeli and Yemenite folk dance. The acceptance of dance based on its biblical and Jewish roots has led to the restoration of ancient forms of praise and worship within the whole body of believers”.

Today’s Israeli dance is a mixture of the many cultures and peoples who settled in Israel. Those who returned to the land brought with them dance steps they had done for centuries. These include:

- Mayims - of Hebrew origin – streams of living water
- Debkas – of Arabic origin – bouncy, heel steps
- Yemenites – from Yemen – quick movement – as on hot sand
- Tcherkessia – from Russia – forward/back steps with open arms – to welcome all people from all directions to return home
- The Hora – from Rumania – this became the national dance of Reborn Israel.

In the conclusion of the Bible’s story of a group of people chosen by God for His purpose – we see a reference to a future wedding....

<sup>KJV</sup> **Song of Solomon 6:13** Return, return, O Shulamite; return, return, that we may look upon thee. What will ye see in the Shulamite? As it were the company of two armies.

In this passage, the word for “company” is “mechowlah”, a word that we’ve seen is normally translated “dance”. So what will you see when you see the Shulamite? You will see a bride who is dancing.

But not only will the bride dance; God Himself will dance! In his prophecy of the end time restoration of His people, the prophet Zephaniah says –



<sup>NKJ</sup> **Zephaniah 3:17-18** The LORD your God in your midst, The Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet *you* with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing. I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, Who are among you, *To whom* its reproach *is* a burden.

In this passage, the second instance of the word “rejoice” is from the Hebrew word “giyl” (Strong’s #1523) which literally means “go round or about, be excited with levity”<sup>9</sup>. The same Hebrew letters spell another word that means “circle”<sup>10</sup>, as in “circle dance”. Thus the New Jerusalem Bible translates the passage this way –

<sup>NJB</sup> **Zephaniah 3:17-18** Yahweh your God is there with you, the warrior-Saviour. He will rejoice over you with happy song, he will renew you by his love, he will dance with shouts of joy for you, as on a day of festival. I have taken away your misfortune; no longer need you bear the disgrace of it.

And, as we look forward to the return of our Bridegroom Messiah – we know that we will be celebrating in the dance with Him. He will dance with shouts of joy for us, and we will dance with Him, after all, it’s part of His culture

The Silent Revival of the people of God (His Israel) is striving to get out of the “controlled box” of protestant worship and return to the beautiful form of worship God gave His people. May Abba grant all of us wisdom, insight to His word and way, and a strong dose of humility as we strive to worship Him in the way that would be pleasing to Him.

**The Dance is returning, and as His future Bride – we can begin to practice now!**

Shalom

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<sup>9</sup> BDB pg. 162

<sup>10</sup> Strong’s #1524