



Prophetic Dance

by Mary Jones

What is prophetic dance?

There are many different ideas about what the term “prophetic dance” means. Some people use it to refer to any spontaneous dance in worship. Others are just unclear about what prophetic dance is or if, indeed, there is such a thing.

Prophecy, in the biblical sense, is for the forthtelling of God’s word for a particular situation and people. It can refer to past, present or future. In both Old and New Testaments there were particular people called to be prophets and in the letter to the Ephesian church prophets were one of the five ministries (Eph.4:11). But Paul also encourages us all to seek to prophesy to order to edify the church - for people’s strengthening, encouragement and comfort (1 Cor.14:1, 3-5).

Dance/movement is a language of communication as are words, music or visual art. Therefore, when dance is communicating God’s word for a particular people and situation it is prophetic. It can be choreographed or spontaneous just as the prophetic in word can come through either a prepared or a spontaneous message.

Certainly in the New Testament we have no teaching that prophecy comes in any other way than the spoken word but in the case of Agabus a powerful part of the communication was his action with the belt (Acts 21:10). Dance and movement are not always easily understood or interpreted and will, therefore, usually have words of some kind teaming with them. The words may be in the song, spoken word before, at the same time or afterwards. In some cases the movement expression may be closer to speaking in tongues, with the interpretation being given either by the dancer or someone else.

There are some differences of emphasis and outlook amongst those who write about prophetic dance. Judith Rock in *Performer as Priest and Prophet* contrasts the two roles a dancer/choreographer plays in worship. “The priest”, she writes, “consolidates, guards, and sanctions, reminding the community of its history, traditions, and achievements; and the... prophet, ...judges and challenges, reminding the same community of its failures and calling for a more righteous future” (p.81). She goes on to say that because prophets speak into particular situations a (choreographed) dance which is prophetic for one congregation may not be perceived as such by another. “If a dance surprises us, challenges us, or helps us see something new, it may be, for that performance and in that place, prophetic.” (p.82). Aimee Kovacs, also a dancer and theologian but from a Pentecostal background, writes in *Dancing into the Anointing* that

“Prophetic dance is spontaneous dance that is inspired by the Holy Spirit and danced by a single person or by a group of people. It is a dance where the mind of God is expressed so that the congregation not only hears the message from God, but also sees the message.”(p.59). “The prophetic dance”, she says, “should follow all the rules of prophecy. The only difference between the spoken prophecy and prophetic dance is that one is a verbal communication whereas the other is speaking through body language.” (p.64).

Some involved in the prophetic movement write about prophetic worship. David Swan quotes Psalm 68 which describes a procession of musicians, singers and dancers coming into the temple. “Prophetic worship”, he writes, “synergises the anointings of various ministries. Prophetic worship entails more than just singing and making music. During prophetic worship, intercession is offered, spiritual warfare is waged, prophetic power is released, anointed sounds are produced and creative words are spoken and sent forth. Glory, life, light and spirit are thus transmitted.” (p. 52) “Prophetic worship synergises the elements of music, singing, dance, mimes, prayer and voices of the congregation to create a powerful corporate expression” resulting in “an amplification of the spiritual power released” (p.57). Dr Bill Hamon in his book “Prophets, Pitfalls and Principles” (p. 199) defines prophetic praise with dance and sign as “Physical movements that are inspirational and anointed by the Holy Spirit and many times accompanied by prophetic song... It is used in praise, adoration and worship to God which can in itself bring in the prophetic mantle (1 Sam.18:6). It may be spontaneous or choreographed...At times, it may communicate divine thoughts, ideas and purposes - a visible expression of what God is saying.” This worship would obviously contain elements that we could not strictly call prophecy but these writers are using the term in a broader way and perhaps more akin to the descriptions of prophesying in the time of Elijah. They are looking at the communal experience which allows, encourages and calls down the expression and reception of what God is wanting to say to his people gathered in that particular place. Despite different nuances, all writers are agreed both from biblical writing and experience that prophecy communicates God’s word and spirit in a particular situation.

Despite some people’s usage of the term “prophetic dance” which is more in line with the broader picture just described, in the more specific sense not all spontaneous dance is prophetic. The dance may sometimes be directed to God in praise, worship, prayer or intercession or it may be directed to the people for the purpose of healing, teaching, evangelism or prophecy. The same will be true of a choreographed dance. However, not every individual or group will have a calling or motivation equally in all these areas. Those who feel led to prophesy in dance and find that God’s anointing is strong as this leading is followed, with the prophetic being expressed in both word and movement may have a particular calling as a prophet. But as Paul encourages all to seek to prophesy, all those who express themselves through dance can be encouraged to prophesy in movement as well as with words.

Prophetic movement and dance in the Bible

When we look at Scripture we find that movement and symbol were often used by prophets. In the days of the early prophets Samuel, Elijah and Elisha we read that there were schools of prophets often called sons (or followers) of the prophets. The word “prophesying”, used to describe their activities, is naba which is the same one used of all prophesying in the Old Testament. From the descriptions in 1 Samuel 10:5-13; 19:20-23; 1 Kings 18:25-26, 1 Chron.25:1 prophecy seemed at this time to indicate not only speaking but ecstatic behaviour which included movement, dance, as well as speaking, shouting, singing and playing. The word is used to describe both true and false or idolatrous prophets and prophecy. The prophets of Baal danced around the altar cutting themselves; Saul and his servants “prophesied” when they came into the presence of Samuel and a group of prophets who were prophesying as a company; and another time Saul is described as prophesying when an evil spirit came upon him and while David was playing the harp (1 Sam.18:10-11). The word “prophesy” in these cases seems to suggest ecstatic movement together with singing or speaking.

With the later prophets the meaning of naba appears to have changed and describes primarily the words that are spoken and their written equivalent. With these written accounts there are descriptions of prophetic action given by God to enhance or initiate the prophetic word. God told Jeremiah to buy a belt and wear it around his waist. Then God directed him to go to Perath and hide it in a crevice in the rocks. Many days later he was instructed to go and retrieve it only to find that it was ruined and useless. This scenario was to express to Judah and Jerusalem that God had bound them to him like a belt as his people but they had refused to listen and had gone after other gods. They were now useless to God (Jeremiah 13:1-11). This visual image would be better understood and remembered than just words. The prophet Ezekiel lay on his left side without speaking for a year and a month and on his right side for forty days. He lay next to a picture he had drawn of Jerusalem against which he had set up model siege works. God directed him to do all this as a warning that God was going to bring siege and famine against Jerusalem (Ezek.4). What an impact this must have had on the community and how well they would have listened when Ezekiel did eventually speak the message with words. Another time God told him to pack up his belongings while the people were watching, dig through the city wall and walk away from the city as if going into exile (Ezek.12).

With the coming of the Holy Spirit to all believers after Pentecost there was a change in the role of the prophet. Under the old covenant the community was dependant on the few anointed with the Holy Spirit, the priests with access to the Urim and Thummim*¹ or the Torah and prophetic writings as read in the temple and synagogue to hear what God was saying. Now all believers could know the voice and leading of the Holy Spirit both through the written word of God and in their hearts and minds. Paul talks about the role of the prophet in the church but at the same time in 1 Cor. 14, as previously noted, encourages all to prophesy (1 Cor. 15).

When we look for examples of prophetic movement in the New Testament we find the example of Mary of Bethany who broke the alabaster jar of pure nard, an expensive perfume worth a year's wages, to anoint Jesus' head and feet in an act of worship and love. She was criticised for wasting the money by some of those at the table but Jesus described her action as a "beautiful thing" and preparation for his burial - a prophetic action (Mk 14:1-11; Jn12:1-10). In the time of the early church the prophet Agabus took Paul's belt, tied his own hands and feet and prophesied that this is what the Jews of Jerusalem would do to the owner of the belt and that they would hand him over to the Gentiles (Acts 21:10).

From these examples it is clear that there is ample evidence for dramatic action being used in prophecy but the evidence for dance is not as numerous or obvious. There are, however, some indications that dance was used by the prophets in Scripture. As well as the sons of the prophets discussed above, we have the much earlier description of Miriam the prophetess leading the women out with tambourines and dancing after the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex.15:19-21). She sang to them, "Sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted. The horse and rider he has hurled into the sea". Even though this short account of the story is placed after the more detailed account which includes a long song starting with these same words and called the Song of Moses, I believe it is more likely that these words were first sung by Miriam and were then added to by Moses. In our present day terms Miriam is the worship leader with a prophetic edge who is calling the people to celebrate what God has done, declaring it to be his work and urging the people to praise him for their deliverance. This is expressed in song and dance with tambourine.

David, as well as being a king with a priestly role, was a prophet. Several of the psalms have messianic prophecies and were fulfilled and quoted by Jesus or the New Testament writers (eg Ps.22 - Matt.27:46, Jn.19). His spontaneous dance in front of the ark was "before the Lord" and an expression of his worship. But it might also be argued that it had a prophetic function in his leadership of the people, indicating to them that they should honour Yaweh above the king as the centre and law-giver of their communal life and encouraging them by example to enthusiastically express their worship and joy in Him.

There are no examples of dance used prophetically or in any other way in worship in the New Testament although we know from the Talmud (Mishnah Sukkah 51 a-b) that dance was still found in the temple where Jewish believers in Jesus still worshipped.

He who has not seen the rejoicing at the place of the water-drawing has never seen rejoicing in his life. At the conclusion of the first day of the tabernacles, they descended to the court of the women where they made a great enactment... men of piety and good deeds used to dance before them with lighted torches in their hands and sing songs and praises.

From the writings of the early and mediaeval church we read that dance and movement are found in worship up to the 17th century.

Prophetic dance and movement today

After almost disappearing from the church for over two hundred years, dance has seen a revival along with the movement of the Holy Spirit during the 20th century. Some would see the re-emergence of dance to be in itself a prophetic sign of Israel and the church moving towards the culmination of the Messianic era when Jesus will return for his bride. Jeremiah prophesied that with the regathering and rebuilding of Israel tambourines and dance would express the new found joy (Jer.31:4,13). Today dance is used in a wider variety of ways than in biblical times as an expression of the gifts and callings of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.12). One of these is prophecy. In spoken prophecy there seem to be a number of ways in which the prophecy can be initiated. Some people have a few words and as they speak these the rest come; others see all the words in front of them; some have a sense of the thought or theme that God is conveying; others see a picture or symbol and speak from that. Movement can also be one of the starting points in prophecy and can flow in a variety of ways.

Following the leading and inspiration of the Holy Spirit the dancer or more than one dancer may feel led to move to a particular song as part of the worship that is directed to the people, encouraging or exhorting them. The first time I was conscious of using dance in a prophetic way was at a conference in New Zealand where I was teaching. Several people were dancing at the front of the auditorium but I felt God was indicating to go up on the stage to dance to a particular song. In thinking about it afterwards I realised that the song was one that was speaking encouragement and as the dance would be directed to the people they needed to see it.

Another way is to speak the prophecy and use movement along with the words. Or the dancer may move at the same time as a prophecy is being spoken or sung by someone else, not just interpreting the words but sensing the direction of the Spirit so that the movement may sometimes lead the words. At other times this may happen at the same time as the words or may come just after as a response. It takes faith and courage to move out in prophecy not knowing exactly what is going to happen and I have found it very encouraging when I have realised that the movement I have found myself doing exactly suited or predicted what was being spoken or sung. Sometimes the musician or speaker and dancer can be very aware of flowing together, at other times it can happen more independently. The dancer may also be led to do a movement by itself that does not have any connection with words or music and may precede something that is to follow later, both prophesying it and interceding for it. This happened to me on a tour of Italy when I lay on the floor of the stage with my hands outstretched in supplication for a very long time, waiting for God to indicate when to get up. At the end of the service, sometime after I had got up, one of the pastors on the team felt led to come out of the congregation where he was sitting and to invite people to come forward to give their lives to the Lord. He said in particular that there was a man who needed to come. It was a long time before the man came. The pastor mentioned several times that he was felt it was important for us to wait for those God was calling to respond and I felt there was a definite connection between the call and my previous action.

At other times the prophetic movement may flow out of a choreographed dance we have performed. On the same tour when we were in Sicily I had such an experience after a dance about the tabernacle of God that uses a silk tent to represent the Tabernacle. The meeting was in an old-fashioned dance hall where the stage was unusually high and the only way I could process with the tent onto the stage was to build steps up to the stage out of the boxes the sound equipment and instruments were packed in. It was quite precarious climbing up the pile of boxes, holding the tent above my head, and then balancing on the rather wobbly shelf before stepping down onto the stage proper. At the end of the dance I felt a leading to go back into the tent and stay there to express God's love and acceptance of us and give a visual invitation to come into the tent of his presence. Later the worship leader gave a call for salvation and more than thirty responded, many of them young people, and I had a sense that my movement had again been both prophetic and intercessory.

At an Arts conference in Cartagena, Colombia, which included the formation of the Christian Dance Fellowship in that country, a group of us were moving spontaneously with flags and dance. I felt the Lord wanted me to lay down the flag and start to dance. I found myself at one point moving as if I were planting seeds all over the stage and realised that this was making a prophetic statement about the planting of the Dance Fellowship all over the country. Later that year I was in western Kenya at a conference held under a shelter in a field as part of the process of starting a Christian Dance Fellowship there. Dance ministry was something new to those present and I was teaching a first session in prayer and prophecy. The CDF Co-ordinator became very excited when he found as he was using the movement from my demonstration in his prayer that he received an interpretation - he sensed the movement was expressing that the CDF would grow from a seed into a big tree. He said he felt his hands just moving to the music in a way they had never moved before. Often in prophetic workshops I will ask people in pairs to pray for a prophetic movement to share with their partner and it is exciting to hear how these are often so pertinent and helpful.

The most important thing in all of these experiences is learning to flow both with the Holy Spirit and those in leadership. Prophetic revelation and declaration need to move out with humility, unity and discernment and those who have prophesied need to receive wise, encouraging feed-back and correction from the leadership where appropriate (1 Cor.14:29-43). It is important that the glory for all this is given and directed to God.

Mary Jones

International Christian Dance Fellowship | www.icdf.com

Footnotes:

*1 *Umim and Thummim*

References:

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Ruth Ward Heflin in *Glory, A Jerusalem Experience* describes an incident in 1973 at a prayer meeting. She was speaking about China and there was a prophetic word that God would open a door to China. They were so excited they started to dance. Two people made a door and before they realised what was happening they were all dancing through the open door (p.33).

Heflin, Ruth Ward. *Glory, A Jerusalem Experience*. Destiny Image, Shippensburg PA, 1990.