

Dancing Before the Lord (2 Sam 6:14)

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Abstract

The issue of dancing in church has been a debate among scholars, especially Seventh-day Adventists. David's dancing before the Lord has been argued to either support or disallow the ritual of dancing in a church (1 Sam 6:14). This paper, however, argues that the dancing of David occurs in a Cultic setting where sacrifices are offered before the ark of God, the symbol of the presence of YHWH. In this setting of worship, David is said to have danced before the Lord as a form of praise to the Lord. David considered God as the object of his dance. Any dance whose object is God may be considered appropriate and religiously necessary in an African context.

Introduction

The Dancing of King David before the Lord (1 Sam 6:14) has been a concern for a number of biblical scholars and commentators. This dancing is considered religious since it sprouts from a religious event. Some have strongly argued that since David danced outside the sanctuary or the temple, this act should not be imitated and entertained in the worship service today. Often times, the comment of Ellen G. White on this act of David has been used to argue against dancing in the church (Bacchiocchi, 2000, pp. 226-228 ; Koranteng-Pipim, n.d.; Nix, 2006, online). For others, his dancing was an expression of sacred communion that culminates worship. Hence, incorporating it into a worship service is religiously sound (Christian, 2002, pp. 164-68; Knott, 1992, pp. 69, 75; Gillespie, 1992, p. 94; Case, n.d.). This paper seeks to determine the meaning of the phrase "dancing before the Lord" in 1 Sam 6:14. Utilising a phraseological approach, this study is presented in five sections: (1) understanding the context of 2 Sam 6:14, (2) Life Setting and Genre of 2 Sam 6:14, (3) dancing before the Lord in 2 Sam 6:14, (4) Spirit of Prophecy and David's dancing before the Lord, and (5) dancing in an African setting of worship.

Understanding the Context of 2 Sam 6:14

The book of Second Samuel depicts a continuation of Israel's kingship and sporadic warfare with heathen nations. The early part of the history concerns David's lament for the death of Saul and his beloved friend Jonathan after he returned from his slaughter of the Amalekites (2 Samuel 1). The demise of Saul made Israel leaderless and vulnerable to Philistine oppression (31:1-10). Theoretically, it should be mentioned that David had been *proleptically* anointed as king of Israel by Samuel while Saul was alive (1 Sam 16:1-14). David was anointed by the people of Judah as king at Hebron for seven and a half years (2 Sam 2:1-4; 5:5). At the same time, Ishbosheth, Saul's son, had been made king of the other tribes by Abner, commander of Saul's army (vv.8-10). This brought political tension between David's family and Saul's family (3:1ff). However, with distrust and suspicion growing between Ishbosheth and Abner, Abner made overtures to David (3:7-16). Abner spearheaded the unification of all the tribes under David as one ruler over Israel (vv. 17-19). It is worthy to note that David demanded that Michal, Saul's daughter, be restored to him as his wife, even though she had a partner (vv. 13-16). Apparently, this was chiefly done to reinforce David's attempt to win sympathy and unification, though it was true that they had been married (1 Sam 18:20-30; Allen, 1996, p. 180). After the death of Ishbosheth, all the tribes of Israel came to Hebron, made a covenant before the Lord and anointed David as king over Israel (5:1-10).

In an effort to consolidate his new kingdom, both the political and religious centres had to be defined, among other things. First, he claimed Jerusalem, the Canaanite stronghold, and made it the city of David (5:6-9). The narrator/editor's religious perspective of the political advancement of the new king is that David grew from strength to strength because the Lord was with him (v.10). David fought and defeated the Philistines twice with the help of the Lord (vv. 18-27; Bruegemann, 1990, p. 119). Political success ensured political stability in the new kingdom. Second, the king sought to bring religious reform (Smith, 2000, p. 388). Leslie C. Allen has perceptively observed, "Israel could not have been truly united unless its political head was also its religious leader" (p. 185). David understood that the ark of God was the symbol of the presence of the Lord among His people (e.g., Exod 30:6; Lev 16:2; Josh 7:6; 1 Sam 4:22). He went to bring the ark of God to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:1-4; 1 Chr 15:29). Since the socio-political fortune of Israel and its religious fate were inseparable, a more functional and structured religious life of the people of God was inevitable (7:1, 9). This may be seen from David's attempt to build a temple for the ark of God, and appointment and assignment of sanctuary duties to the Levites (7:2-4; 1 Chr 15:1-16:43). The dancing of David before the Lord happened when the ark of God was being brought from Baale-Judah to Jerusalem (2 Sam 6:1-4; 1 Chr 15:29). 2 Sam 6 concerns itself with the transportation of the ark from one place to another. Chapter 5 focuses mainly on the final enthronement scene and subjugation of the Philistines while chap. 7 indicates David's intention to build a temple for YHWH and announces YHWH's eternal covenant with the Davidic lineage (7:11-16). This means that 6:14 may be understood primarily in chap. 6, that is, within the transportation of the ark. In sum, after a period of political wrangling, 2 Samuel 6 breathes a refreshing and a new order of a peaceful political unification occasioned by God. David is seen as the main beneficiary of this act of God. He recognizes God as being responsible for his political success. This understanding may have informed him to build a permanent dwelling place for the ark of God, the symbol of YHWH's presence. With this context in view, the meaning of the phrase, dancing before the Lord, is considered by first looking at its life setting and genre (Youngblood, 1976, vol. 3. pp. 554-55).

Life Setting and Genre of 2 Sam 6:14

The context makes clear that the ark of God is the main object of concern of 2 Sam 6. It is referred to as 'the ark of God' (vv. 2,3,4,6,7,12[2x]) and "the ark of the Lord" (vv. 9,10,11,13,15,16,17) seven times respectively. Verse 2 indicates that the ark "is called by the Name, the very name of the Lord," an expression of ownership (cf. 12:24; Brown, 1980, s.v. *'ârôn*). It stands for the presence of YHWH (cf. Exod 23:21; Lev 24:11,16). The location of the ark, among the Israelites, is designated as the centralized place of worship (Deut 12:5, 11, 21; 14:23-24; 16:2,6,11, 26:2). When the ark was taken from them, the glory departed from Israel; thus, defeat in warfare was their lot (1 Sam 4:22; cf. 14:18f; 2 Sam 6:12,18). The ark concretised their religious experiences and identity. Youngblood (1976) observes that it is "the repository of the covenant, locus of atonement, throne of the invisible Yahweh" (pp. 554-55). The frequent references to the ark in 2 Sam 6 suggest that YHWH is identified with the ark.

In 2 Sam 6:13, David sacrificed an ox and a fattened calf when the bearers of the ark had gone six paces. It may be noted that oxen/bulls were usually sacrificed as burnt and peace offerings (Lev 1:4-6; 4:10; 9:4, 18). Again, he offered burnt and peace offerings before the Lord when he brought the ark to Jerusalem and placed it in the tent (2 Sam 6:17-18). It is insightful to note that David offered sacrifice for YHWH both outside and inside the tent where the ark dwells. This suggests a spatial importance of the ark in terms of worship. A similar incident happened when King Solomon transferred the ark of the covenant of the Lord from the city of David to the temple. Solomon offered sacrifices before the ark during the transference of the ark and when it was placed in the temple (1 Kings 8:5, 62-64). In other words, the tent/tabernacle minus the ark has little religious and political significance for Israel (1 Sam 3:3; 4:11, 22). The tabernacle/tent was the dwelling place of YHWH (Exod 25:22). In some circumstances, sacrifices were offered to YHWH without the presence of the ark and outside the tabernacle/temple (e.g., Judges 6:25-26; 13:19; 1 Kgs 18; 1 Chr 21:26-30). YHWH could not be confined to a specific structured spatial domain. In any event, the ark was the symbol of God's presence in 2 Sam 6 not the tabernacle. The iterative reference to the ark of God and its attendant sacrificial services of this chapter may be Cultic, in which v. 14 falls (See Youngblood, 1976, pp. 554-55; Evans, 2004, pp. 194-95). In short, David's dancing before the Lord appears in Cultic setting.

Dancing before the Lord in 2 Sam 6:14

The phrase “dancing before the Lord” occurs only in 2 Sam 6:14,16. The word ‘dance’ is the translation of the Hebrew *kārar*. It occurs twice in the Hebrew Bible [hereafter referred to as HB] (2 Sam 6:14,16). In all of its occurrences, it is pilpel participle masculine singular absolute and literally means “dancing” “whirling,” referring to David’s act before the Lord (Brown, s.v. *kārar*). The pilpel verbal stem may indicate the repetitious nature of the act (Kautzsch, n.d., 152-53; Smith, 387). This rendering may be supported by the phrase “with all his might” in v. 14. This phrase signifies the tempo of his movement. Also, the accompanying instruments may make it more likely to be read as “dancing” (vv. 5, 15). This dancing was before the Lord.

The phrase “before the Lord” is the rendering of the Hebrew *lipnê yhwh*. In the HB, it occurs not less than 200 times. *Lipnê* is a composite of a substantive *panîm* “face” and a particle preposition *le* “to.” *Lipnê* is a plural construct as it relates to *yhwh* in its present form and functions syntactically here as a preposition ‘before’ (Waltke and O’Connor, 1990, p. 221). As a preposition, it is used to show a relationship between two words. With the spate of occurrences of the phrase, the following is representative. In Gen 18:22, Abraham is said to have stood before the Lord *lipnê yhwh* to plead on behalf of Sodom. This context suggests that the Lord was bodily present when Abraham stood before. In this case, the use of *lipnê* may have spatial sense (cf. Exod 34:34). Gen 10:9 indicates that Nimrod was a hunter before the Lord *lipnê yhwh*, probably signifying notable recognition of his territorial expansionary success in his time (cf. vv. 10-12). Every distasteful act wrought among the children of Israel is an abomination before the Lord *lipnê yhwh* (Deut 24:4; Josh 6:26). The phrase can be used for YHWH as the sole arbiter or witness (1 Sam 12:3; 23:18; 26:19; 2 Sam 3:28; 5:3). This suggests that the phrase can have a variety of meanings and that the context is the decisive factor.

Although the Lord may not be bodily or symbolically present, yet prayers/thanksgiving, and sacrifices are offered before the Lord (Gen 24:52; Judges 6:25-26; 13:19; 1 Kings 18; 1 Chr 21:26-30). These services were Cultic in nature. When the Lord is not bodily or symbolically present, his omnipresent is perceived. Probably, it was understood that the presence of God was not confined to only the holy of holies where the ark was but was also considered omnipresent. Every act, be it good or evil, is considered to be done before the Lord. The children of Israel were expected to live within the covenantal laws (Exod 19:5; 24:7; 34:14; Deut 6:5; 10:12).

Prayers were presented before the Lord in the tabernacle/temple where the ark of God was (1 Sam 1:10, 12; 2 Kings 19:14-15). All the sacrificial services conducted in the tabernacle were done before the Lord because the ark of God was present (e.g., Lev 10:1, 15, 19; 27:11; Num 3:4; 6:20; 7:3; 8:21; 16:38; 26:61; Judges 20:26; 2 Sam 6:17; 1 Kings 3:15; 8:62, 64; 1 Chr 23:31; 2 Chr 1:6; 7:4, 7; 8:12; 24:14). This suggests that when the ark of God is in view, a near-spatial sense is conceived.

As already noted, David offered sacrifices to the Lord when the bearers of the ark had gone six paces (2 Sam 6:13; cf. 1 Kings 8:5). This suggests that David was behind the ark. Thus, he danced behind it as well (Youngblood, 870). However, the phrase “before the Lord” may refer to the object of his dance since the ark symbolised His presence. Symbolically, the Lord was present, and that defines the spatial relation. In short, David danced in the presence of the Lord. Of David’s dance, Nichol says,

David’s dancing was an act of solemn and holy joy. To an Oriental of that day such an activity was a natural mode of expression, however strange it may seem to us today. By this means David expressed his grateful praise and thus gave honor and glory to God’s holy name (1976-1980, vol. 2. p. 627).

Since his dancing appears in a Cultic setting, it is fair to say that it occurred during the worship of YHWH, that is, divine worship. The author/narrator of 2 Samuel observes that Michal, the wife of David and daughter of Saul, despised David for leaping and dancing before the Lord from the window (6:16,20). This suggests that Michal did not take part in this worship and had been observing from a distance. As has been observed by a number of commentators, she took this opportunity to vent her anger towards David for taking her father’s place (Anderson, 1989, p. 107). Again, the comment of Nichol is apt: “When David sang and danced before God his act of worship was honored by Heaven, but it was despised by his wife. Michal, whose father had been ecstatic on more than one occasion (1 Sam. 10:10; 19:22-24), had no right to complain of David’s exuberance” (p. 627). David’s response to his wife is insightful, “. . . it was before the LORD, who chose me above your father, and above all his house, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the LORD -- and I will make merry before the LORD” (vv. 21-22, RSV). Such detail and personal discourse are informative in that they clarify some intent of dancing before the Lord as an act of praise in divine worship. The Lord has guided him to consolidate his kingdom amidst all the political upheavals (2 Sam 5:19-25). The editorial

comment in 6:23 betrays the evaluative perspective of the author/editor (Cole, 2002, p. 270). It reads, “And Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death” (RSV). It may be implied that she did not receive the blessings that David pronounced on both men and women who were and shared in his reason for dancing before the Lord (vv. 20,22). Robert D. Bergen comments, “In rejecting David, Michal has rejected the Lord because it was he who ‘chose’ David in preference to Michal’s ‘father or anyone from his house’ to lead Israel” (1996, p. 332). David danced before the Lord probably *because* the Lord considered him worthy, considering his ordinary background, to rule over Israel (1 Sam 16:7). To him, this favour meant a lot (Gordon, p. 235; Evans, pp. 194-95, Smith 389-90; Anderson, p. 107). Therefore, it can be maintained that David danced before the Lord whose presence was symbolised by the presence of the ark, and his reason for this act in the presence of the Lord was personal (cf. 1 Sam 16:6-13). David’s dance of praise was a spontaneous one. In what follows, Ellen G. White’s comment on David’s dancing before the Lord will be considered to ascertain whether using her writings to generalise her attitude towards dancing is hermeneutically appropriate.

Spirit of Prophecy and David’s Dancing before the Lord

Ellen G. White’s comment on David’s “dancing before the Lord” has been understood by some as her frowning on dancing in general (Nichol, p. 627). She writes,

David’s dancing in reverent joy before God has been cited by pleasure lovers in justification of the fashionable modern dance, but there is no ground for such an argument. In our day dancing is associated with folly and midnight revelling. Health and morals are sacrificed to pleasure. By the frequenters of the ballroom God is not an object of thought and reverence; prayer or the song of praise would be felt to be out of place in their assemblies. This test should be decisive. Amusements that have a tendency to weaken the love for sacred things and lessen our joy in the service of God are not to be sought by Christians. The music and dancing in joyful praise to God at the removal of the ark had not the faintest resemblance to the dissipation of modern dancing. The one tended to the remembrance of God and exalted His holy name. The other is a device of Satan to cause men to forget God and to dishonor Him (White, 1952, p. 517).

It is clear from this quote that she frowned on popular dancing in her time because it was associated with folly and midnight revelling. In addition, in ballroom dancing where partner dancers danced on a stage for social entertainment, God is not the object of thought and reverence. Her statement, in its entirety, may not frown on dancing *per se*. It may be inferred that any dance whose object of worship is God may be appropriate. How dancing may be understood in an African worship setting in view of the foregoing analysis is presented below.

Dancing in African Setting of Worship

Dancing as a mode of worship is not programmed as part of African (particularly Ghanaian) SDA Saturday worship service. Generally, the African SDA Saturday worship service conforms to the sacred principles that undergird worship of the worldwide (Seventh-day Adventist Church Manual, 2010, p. 76). This means that the object of their worship should be God. However, African traditional music intrinsically is rhythmic and encourages body movement (Music in Africa, online). It should be mentioned that not all of African songs encourage dancing. There are some songs that call for solemn reflection, for example, dirge, appellations. Dancing can be social or religious depending on the context. People dance in durbar, wedding, naming, birthday, and funeral ceremonies. In these circumstances, the motive and object of the dancing may be personal. Particularly in naming ceremonies, celebrants generally would like to respond with a dance to either express social happiness or thanksgiving to God. Such motive can only be determined by the celebrant. In a religious setting, the motive and object of dance is supposed to be God, the sole reason for any ritual performed. As the foregoing study on the dancing of David before the Lord has shown, in the words of James E. Smith, “David was more concerned to honour the Lord than to boost his own ego” (Smith, p. 390). In other words, in any religious setting where God becomes the focus of praise in dance, as was in David’s case, dance may not be considered inappropriate but rather a response to God’s faithfulness. The motive of such form of praise may be meaningfully appreciated by the dancer and the object of the dance. Spontaneous dance of

praise in any worship mode can be encouraged to allow cultures who indigenously regard dance as a form of praising their maker to understand worship as indigenously biblical.

Conclusion

The paper has arrived at the following conclusion: the dancing of David occurs in a Cultic setting when he offered sacrifices to the Lord in the transference of the ark. He danced in the presence of the ark, where the presence of God is in view. This means that he danced during divine worship. The location wherein such act occurred was divine because the ark of God was present. Even wherever the name of God is invoked or whenever the believer is ever-conscious of the omniscience of God, any dance whose object is God may be viewed as dancing before the Lord.

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