She Dances: Miriam and Worship as Prophetic Action[1]

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Abstract:

Worship is our heartfelt response to God's initiative in revealing himself and saving us. Following the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and Miriam lead the people in celebratory worship (Exo 15). Here we are introduced to Miriam, the "prophetess." Yet, in what way is Miriam is considered a prophet? And what does she do that is so prophetic. This paper explores Miriam's experience in the Exodus event, focusing on her role in leading worship. As recorded in Exodus 15:20-21, Miriam plays the hand-drum, dances and instructs the Israelites to sing. These worship activities are considered prophetic as Miriam presents a prophetic performance of liberation. As a prophet, she is both an embodied communicator and communicates through an embodied message. Miriam announces through this musical performance the dismantling of Pharaoh's power and the establishment of a new community based on God's freedom. Connections to recent expressions of prophetic dance are explored, particularly the historic use of dance as a ritual activity among some Afro-Pentecostal communities within the COGIC community as an expression of liberation and a form of non-violent resistance. Miriam models for readers today the need for prophetic expression in worship that communicates God's freedom.

Keywords:

Miriam — prophet — Old Testament — prophetic performance — Exodus — Pentecostal

Introduction

Worship is our heartfelt response to God. It is God who initiates relationship with us by revealing himself and rescuing us.[2] Following the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses and Miriam lead the people in celebratory worship (Exo 15). Here we are introduced to Miriam, the "prophetess." A prophet in the Old Testament can be understood as one who communicates on behalf of God his perspective and passion for the purpose of faithful living. So, in what way

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[2] Jacqueline Grey, 'Worship: A Pentecostal Perspective,' *Australasian Pentecostal Studies*, 2023 Vol 24, Issue 1: 53.

is Miriam considered a prophet? And what does she do that is so prophetic? This paper explores Miriam's role in the Exodus event, focusing on her actions in leading the people in worship. As recorded in Exodus 15:20-21, Miriam worships God with singing, dancing and playing the hand-drum. These worship activities are considered prophetic because Miriam's prophetic performance of liberation functions in the narrative to dismantle Pharaoh's power and prepare the way for a new community based on God's freedom. Miriam models for readers today the need for prophetic expression in worship that communicates God's freedom and liberation.

1. Miriam's Story

The book of Exodus opens with the flourishing fertility of the people of God (Exo 1:7) as they shift from being a large family to a burgeoning nation. However, this population growth causes the current Pharaoh to be concerned for Egyptian sovereignty. To control the Israelites, Pharaoh oppresses them through a program of enforced labor (1:10). Pharaoh's fears subsequently give rise to his policy of infanticide (Exo 1:16). However, the brave and shrewd midwives (who are named: Shiphrah and Puah) subvert Pharaoh's instructions to ensure the survival of the Hebrew male children. Therefore, the Israelites multiplied; according to God's blessing of, and intention for, humanity outlined in the creation narrative (Gen 1: 28). It is in this context that the first possible reference to Miriam in the biblical text is given.

Exodus 2 begins with the birth story of Moses. Initially, the baby Moses is hidden by his mother. However, after three months he can no longer be concealed. Moses is placed into a papyrus basket (literally an "ark" as in a miniature form of what Noah built)[3] and is left exposed on edge of the Nile riverbank. Moses's sister watches over him from a distance to see what comes of him. According to tradition, Miriam is this older sister of Moses.[4] However, the baby Moses, vulnerable and exposed on the Nile River, is rescued by Pharaoh's daughter. The sister (assumed to be Miriam) then steps in and cleverly offers to locate a local wetnurse to care for the baby. The speech of this Hebrew girl addressing Pharaoh's daughter is recorded (2:7). Miriam recruits Moses's (and her) mother to act as a paid carer for baby Moses (2:8). Miriam has a key role as an agent in this story as she negotiates the arrangements and ensures the survival of Moses.[5] Pharaoh's daughter later adopts Moses as her son. Note the pattern of women who have functioned as rescuers of Moses: the midwives, his mother, Miriam, and Pharaoh's daughter.6 Rescue is a central theme in the book of Exodus modelled by these women. Moses will also grow to have a key role in God's rescue of Israel.

As an adult, Moses is called by God to lead the Israelites from Egypt to worship God. This requires Moses to confront the Pharaoh with these words from God: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me in the wilderness" (7:16). The liberation of Israel from Egypt was

[3] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Exodus*, The Story of God Bible Commentary (Zondervan, 2021), 72.
[4] The Midrashic literature identifies Miriam as the eldest child of Jochebed and Amram.
[5] Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus*: *A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 18.
[6] Wright, *Exodus*, 283.

for the purpose of worshipping God. While the people were under the servitude of the Pharaoh (who had a god-like status) they were not free to worship their covenant God alone.

Following the disastrous plagues, Pharaoh relents and gives permission for the people to go to the wilderness to worship God. The people defiantly march out from Egypt (14:8). They are led by God via a longer but peaceful route, requiring them to cross the Red Sea. However, Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites with his army in chariots. The refugees were seemingly trapped between the desert and the sea (14:5). Upon seeing Pharaoh and his army, the Israelites were terrified and cried out to God (14:10). Following God's instructions, Moses stretched out his arms over the sea, which parted to allow the people to cross on dry land into the desert and their freedom (14:21-22). Miraculously, the people were saved by God while Pharoah and his armies drown in the sea (14:28). God rescued them.

The next reference to Miriam is following the crossing of the Red Sea (15:20-21). Exodus 15 describes Moses leading the people in a victory song to celebrate their liberation from Egypt and deliverance from Pharaoh's army. Standing in the wilderness, on the other side of the Red Sea, they sing in response to God's intervention and salvation. The song uses cosmic language to give praise and glory to God. This song is considered some of the oldest poetry in the Bible.[7] However, later in the chapter we discover that Moses is not the only worship leader. Miriam is also leading the people in song (Exo 15:20-21). Miriam sings to "them," both men and women. She also commands both men and women to "sing," [8] and join her in joyful celebration of God their deliverer. As will be discussed below, it was expected for women to sing victory songs. What is unexpected is that the men also sing. Yet, to find men and women singing together in mutuality is a beautiful expression of unity.

In Exodus 15 we are explicitly given Miriam's name for the first time:

> Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. **21** Miriam sang to them:
>
> "Sing to the LORD,
> for he is highly exalted.
> Both horse and driver
> he has hurled into the sea." Exodus 15:20-21

The name Miriam is most likely derived from the Egyptian word meaning "Beloved."[9] Importantly, she is identified first as prophet (literally *neviʾāh*, "prophetess"), then as a sister. Miriam's ministry title precedes her familial role. In fact, Miriam is the first woman in the Bible to be called a "prophet" (15:20a)—not even Moses is given this title as yet (see Deut 18). It is

[7] Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Westminster John Knox, 2010), 161.
[8] The word "them" in 15:21 is masculine plural, as is the imperative "sing."
[9] Rita J. Burns, p.10. However there are other theories as to the etymology of her name, such as Judith Dowling who notes that in the *midrashic* tradition her name is connected to the experience in Egypt (*marah* meaning "bitterness") and to the location (*meri* meaning "rebellion" and *yam* "sea"). See Judith Dowling, 'Lost Voices of the Feminine,' *Jung Journal: Culture & Psyche*, Spring 2018, Vol 12, No 2: 57.

also noteworthy that she is not called *a* prophet, but *the* prophet Miriam. This suggests that her reputation and prophetic ministry is well known.[10]

Interestingly, Miriam is identified in Exodus 15 as the sister of Aaron rather than Moses. The genealogical record noted in Exodus 6:20 identifies Aaron as the older brother of Moses (6:20). This makes Miriam the sister of both Aaron and Moses. This is confirmed in the genealogies of Numbers 26:59 and 1 Chronicles 5:29 in which Miriam is listed as the sister of Moses and Aaron. Why, then, is Miriam noted in Exodus 15:20 as Aaron's sister and not Moses's? Victor Hamilton suggests this connection to Aaron might hint at Miriam having some kind of priestly role in the community prior to the Sinai covenant.[11] Previously in the Exodus narrative, some priestly functions (such as circumcision) seem to have been performed by either gender. We see Moses's wife Zipporah performing the circumcision of their son in Exodus 4:24-26. The male-only priesthood was established later in the narrative as part of the requirements of the Law (Exo 28:1). Yet, we will see as the story of the Exodus continues, the three siblings are leading together, though not equally and unfortunately not always harmoniously. Aaron's leadership seems to wain after the golden calf incident (Exo 32), and Miriam's influence declines following the contention in Numbers 12. Yet, the reference to the three siblings in the later traditions of Israel, reflected in Micah 6:4, reinforces that the three worked together in leading the people out of Egypt despite the later conflicts.[12]

Numbers 12:1-15 narrates the conflict between Moses, on the one hand, and Miriam and Aaron on the other. The tension began due to controversy over Moses marrying a Cushite woman (12:1). But this issue is only part of the story. The real dispute is about prophetic authority. Miriam and Aaron make a claim that they also hear from God (12:1), and thereby question why Moses's ability is privileged over theirs. They began to "speak against" Moses. Technically they are correct. They do hear from God. However, God summons them to the Tent of Meeting. Through the cloud, God says: Moses speaks with God face-to-face, while other prophets hear God in visions, dreams, and riddles (12:5-9). This suggests that some prophets do hear God more clearly—which most certainly was the case with Moses. Other prophets hear God through lesser means, such as dreams and vision that must be interpreted. However, the real issue seems to be jealousy of Moses, which has promoted disunity among the siblings. The challenge of Moses's authority results in the punishment of Miriam. When the cloud lifts, Miriam is afflicted with leprosy (12:10). It seems that Miriam is punished, and not Aaron, because she was the instigator of the conflict. This is emphasized by her being named first in the account (12:1). Miriam accepts responsibility for the incident and doesn't try to blame Aaron. However, Aaron cries out in anguish at her punishment and Moses intercedes for her. Miriam is confined outside the camp for seven days before she is fully

[10] Craig A. Evans, 'Celebrating Victory from the Sea of Reeds to the Eschatological Battle Field: Miriam's Timbrels and Dances in Exodus 15 and Beyond,' *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, Vol 51 No. 4 (2021): 208.
[11] Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2011), 400.
[12] Wright, *Exodus*, 282.

healed and restored. Later, the Numbers account records the death of Miriam at Kadesh (20:1).[13]

In summary, we have two main references to Miriam's prophetic activity. The first reference in Exodus 15:20-21 follows the crossing of the Red Sea and the destruction of Pharoah's armies. Here Miriam is identified as a prophet. The second reference, in Numbers 12:1-16, describes Miriam challenging Moses's authority. When God responds to her murmuring, God does not deny that Miriam is a prophet (*nāvi'*) and that he also speaks through her. This suggests that she, like other prophets, hears from God in visions, dreams, and riddles. This again reinforces that Miriam is recognized as a prophet; she does hear from and communicate on behalf of God. Yet, these forms of prophecy (visions, dreams, and riddles) are considered secondary to the direct speech of God, possibly because they require further interpretation to be understood. This is important to note as some scholars have suggested that the title of prophet used of Miriam is a general title for a leader.[14] However, this term "prophet" (*nāvi'*) is not used to designate a generic leader elsewhere in the Old Testament, so it should not be considered as such for Miriam. She is called a prophet and is a prophet. So, what does Miriam say and do that supports her title as a prophet?

2. Miriam the Prophet

When someone is identified as a prophet, we would expect some kind of prophetic activity to follow.[15] The focus of this section is to examine what Miriam does following her introduction as a prophet in Exodus 15:20-21 to justify or explain her title. What does Miriam do after she is first called a prophet? Miriam takes up a hand-drum and leads the women in drumming and dancing, then calls the whole community (men and women) to join her in singing a victory song (Ex 15:20-21). Miriam is a prophet through her role as a worship leader. However, this is no ordinary worship event. This is a prophetic re-enactment of the victory of God and the rescue of the Israelites from slavery expressed through drumming, dancing, and song. Miriam presents a prophetic performance of liberation.

We see prophetic performances all through the Bible: Isaiah walked around naked to symbolize the shame of defeat to Assyria (Isa 20); Jeremiah broke a pot to represent the impending destruction of Jerusalem (Jer 19:1-13); Ezekiel had to lie on his side to signify the sins of the people (Ezek 4:4-8); and many more. David Stacey suggests there are over forty such examples of prophetic dramatic actions in the Old Testament.[16] This reminds us that communication of a prophetic message is not always spoken (oral) but is sometimes presented through physical actions.

While prophetic performance can refer to the speech of a prophet as a dramatic presentation, it can also refer to the actions and objects used by a prophet. It includes the use

[13] There is only one other reference to Miriam in the Old Testament, found in Deut 24:9 which references this incident in the wilderness.
[14] Rita J. Burns, p.2.
[15] Wilda C. Gafney. Daughters of Miriam: Women Prophets in Ancient Israel, 6.
[16] David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (Wipf and Stock, 1990), 3.

of symbolic activity presented to communicate a message from God. A prophetic performance (or prophetic drama[17]) is not just odd, eccentric behavior associated with prophets.[18] The actions or objects used in prophetic communication are deliberate and meaningful beyond their regular, everyday usage (such as breaking pottery or announcing a pregnancy).[19] Jeanette Mathews refers to such prophets as "embodied communicators;"[20] using their physical bodies and objects to convey their message. She links it to the idea of street theater or performance art. In prophetic action, the prophet provides a visual experience and a creative message from God.[21] The action is intended to arouse the feelings of the observers and provoke a response from the audience;[22] it is not mere cognitive information being relayed but a holistic message that addresses the whole person.

Interpreting the meaning of prophetic actions is complex but not elusive. That is, we are not necessarily told what a prophet intended their actions to communicate. If a prophet provides an explanation or commentary for their actions, then the task of interpretation is considerably easier. Yet, even if an explanation is not provided, the study of the literary context can provide an interpretive key to understand the actions performed by a prophet. Of course, no interpretation is *the* definitive answer. There is always new understanding and new insights that can be gleaned. But, through careful analysis, we can discern and interpret the message of the prophets. In the case of Miriam, we are not told what her actions of dancing, drumming and singing signified, but by reading it in the context of the liberation from Egypt we can glean some key insights.

However, it is also important not to impose contemporary meanings onto prophetic actions described in the Bible. For example, to walk around naked in some contemporary Western cultures might supposedly symbolize freedom from social and sexual constraints. It would be a mistake to impose this meaning onto a prophetic action described in the Bible. The prophetic performance of Isaiah is a case in point (Isa 20). Isaiah's nakedness does not represent freedom but symbolizes shame and humiliation. The actions of the prophets in the Bible must be understood according to their history and culture. They are descriptions of events performed in a time and place. As Mathews writes, "Rather than just words on a page, embodied performance means that real bodies in real time will act out the truths of the tradition."[23] So, in light of this concept of prophetic performance, what might Miriam's actions of playing the hand-drum, dance, and song represent in this prophetic drama of Exodus 15:20-21?

[17] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament,* 22.
[18] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament,* 11.
[19] Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers: Biblical Performance Criticism and Israel's Prophets* (Cascade, 2020), 8.
[20] Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 74.
[21] Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 89.
[22] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament,* 20.
[23] Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 90.

3. Prophetic Worship: Drumming, Dancing, and Singing

Through her worship and actions, Miriam interprets the events of the Exodus as a liberation from the bondage of Pharaoh and his army. This is the first record of God intervening in Israel's history as an agent of liberation. Miriam reveals God's intention for their freedom and rescue from Egypt; to worship God in the wilderness (Exo. 7:16). They were not rescued merely because God opposes slavery. While the Israelites were in the service of Pharoah, who was considered divine, they were not free to worship God. Their loyalties were divided between their covenant God and the god Pharaoh, and their worldview shaped by Egyptian thinking. Therefore, the Israelites were liberated for the purpose of worship; to know God and be renewed in their mind into his image and reflect his character to those around them.

Worship is "our human expression of reverence and devotion directed towards God."[24] Worship is our response to God for his saving acts. A key aspect of worship concerns recalling the acts of God in human history and experience. As Terence Fretheim notes, their worship is "the product of a new experience, an experience of both God and people as liberator and liberated."[25] Their worship is a response to their new, and deeply felt experience of freedom, provided by God.[26] Miriam prophetically shapes this worship act as she drums, dances, and sings.

As a prophet, Miriam interprets the event of the Exodus and communicates God's intentions through the activity of worship. Yet, the Exodus is significant not only for Miriam and the Israelites who, according to the narrative, directly experienced God's rescue. The Exodus also becomes a symbol throughout the entire Bible representing redemption and liberation. Miriam's prophetic act of worship not only follows God's victory over Egypt, but it also precedes all future exodus-type acts that God will do in the future. After all, the future is not hidden from God.[27] Activities that promote life and liberation reflect the character of God. Miriam's worship then prophetically announces and prepares for future victories and liberation to be experienced by God's people.

The location of Miriam's prophetic worship is important. They are celebrating the victory of God in the wilderness. They are no longer in Egypt and slaves to Pharaoh. The wilderness is their current location, the place where they are now free to worship God. The wilderness is a liminal space; a place where they must rely on God for survival. It is a place where their previous mindset and Egyptian thinking will be deconstructed, and their worldview re-made based on God's ways and laws.[28] Miriam's song then provides closure to the Exodus account and makes way for the new life of the Israelites freed from slavery and now beginning their new life in God.[29] Miriam has the last word because she interprets the

[24] Jacqueline N. Grey, 'Worship: A Pentecostal Perspective,' *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 24 (2023): 53.
[25] Fretheim, *Exodus*,163.
[26] *ibid.*
[27] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament,* 49.
[28] Narelle J. Coetzee, *Wilderness Theophanies in Exodus: The Wonder and Wildness of Yahweh's Appearance in the Wilderness* (Peter Lang, 2024), xx. CHECK
[29] Phylis Trible, 'Bringing Miriam out of the Shadows,' in A. Brenner (ed) *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 170.

defeat of their enslavers from God's perspective. In a prophetic sense, her song also brings a sense of closure to the experience of slavery so that the Israelites can begin anew in the desert as a transformed community.

Miriam's prophetic activity is expressed in three main musical forms. She takes up the hand-drum, she dances, and she sings. We are given no description of these activities other than they were performed by Miriam. Yet, the narrative and context suggest that these rituals were more than just an everyday worship event but were prophetic. Let's examine each of these activities in turn to see how they function as prophetic performances.

3.1 Hand-drumming

The first of Miriam's prophetic actions is that she takes up and plays the hand-drum. The narrative tells us that all the women followed her, also playing the hand-drum (15:20). Often translated as a "timbrel," which can wrongly suggest to the modern reader a tambourine style instrument with cymbals. The hand-drum was a small disk covered with animal skin. Carol Meyers highlights numerous examples of ancient pottery unearthed by archaeologists that depict women playing such instruments.[30] Other sources suggest that this activity of drumming by women was well-known in the ancient Near East before this event. Laban's reference to the use of music and hand-drums in Genesis 31:27 testifies to its use in the broader culture before the Exodus event.[31] Then, after Exodus 15, there are numerous examples in the Bible of women playing the hand-drum, dancing, and singing victory songs in celebration of Israel's success in battle (see, for example, Judg. 11:34; 1 Sam. 18:6). According to Susan Ackerman, Israelite women were responsible for "singing victory songs after an Israelite triumph in holy war and appear to have assumed a principal position as ritual musicians upon occasions of lament."[32] Hand-drums also were used as part of the prophetic ecstatic worship (1 Sam. 10:5).[33] However, Miriam taking up the hand-drum seems to be the first occasion for the Israelites to incorporate such an instrument in their worship. Miriam perhaps even inaugurates this custom for the Israelites.[34]

Exodus 15:20 provides us with a very simple description. Drumming, dancing and worship cannot be captured in words but must be acted out and experienced. Worship is embodied. Try and imagine hearing the hand-drums of Miriam and the women playing in joyous celebration of God and in response to their liberation. They are no longer prisoners of Pharaoh. They are free. Can you hear the passionate beating of the women's hands on animal skins, flesh on flesh? Can you feel the rhythm, like a heartbeat? There is a sense of

[30] Carol Meyers, 'Miriam the Musician,' in A. Brenner (ed) *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 210-213.
[31] Though it is noted that historically the poetry of Ex 15 is most likely older than the narrative of Gen 31.
[32] Susan Ackerman, 'Why is Miriam also among the Prophets? (And is Zipporah among the Priests?), *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121/1 (2002), 48.
[33] Hamilton, *Exodus*, 397.
[34] Evans, 'Celebrating Victory from the Sea of Reeds to the Eschatological Battle Field,' 206.

empowerment and freedom in the beat as they are now free to worship God in the wilderness. It is wild. It is present.

3.2 Dancing

Secondly, Miriam leads the women in dancing. Dancing in the Old Testament is mostly connected to the Temple worship and sacrificial system (sometimes called the "cult," from the French term for worship). King David disrobed and danced enthusiastically as the ark of the Lord was transported to Jerusalem (1 Sam 6:14-15). The book of Psalms refers to dancing as part of praise and worship (See Psa 149:1-3). Dance was, and is, a common practice in religions and spirituality beyond the Judea-Christian tradition. However, while it may not be unique to this tradition, the object of their worship in the God revealed in Scripture is distinct.

Although dancing in contemporary contexts can be a form of exercise for health purposes, this is not the case in the Old Testament. Dancing is, as Stacey asserts, "an act of celebration." [35] In fact, he notes all kinds of dancing connected to worship: processional dances (2 Sam 6:5), dancing at sacrifices (Ex 32:6,19), dancing in state of prophetic trance (1 Sam 10:5), festival dances (Judg 21:16-24), and victory dances (Ex 15:20).[36] These various dances use the movement of the body to physically communicate a message.

Dancing is also connected to prophecy. First Samuel 10:5b-7 describes a procession of prophets making music, dancing, and prophesying as God's Spirit overwhelms them. Saul is similarly overwhelmed and joins them in prophesying. So dancing is connected to both traditions of worship and prophecy. Miriam is the model *par excellence* for the combining of these two traditions as she performs a prophetic dance. Why should we consider Miriam's dance a prophetic activity? She is interpreting the events of the Exodus as a liberation from Egypt through her movement. The prophetic significance of the defeat of Pharoah is dramatically expressed and embodied in her dance. Dramatic dance, with its energy, force and its expressive movements, mimics the power, energy, and irresistible force of God. There are no words spoken or needed as the "word" becomes "flesh" and dances among them.[37] If only video recording had been invented then!

Dance also provides emotional release.[38] There was no doubt great psychological trauma experienced in their slavery. Participation in embodied expressions of dance and worship arguably offers a therapeutic physical release of the effects of trauma.[39] Definitions of trauma vary, but generally "focuses on the range of responses evoked by an experience perceived to pose an extreme threat and that overwhelms an individual's ordinary means of coping."[40] In more recent years, biblical scholars have been using trauma as a useful lens from

[35] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament,* 30.
[36] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament,* 31.
[37] Jo Ann B. Higginbotham, 'Dance and Pentecostal Worship,' Presented at the Twenty Sixth Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, 13-15 March 1997, Oakland California, 13-14.
[38] Higginbotham, 4.
[39] Sarah Gee, 'Exploring Embodied Worship as a Spiritually and Trauma Informed Expressive Arts Intervention for Those who have Experienced Trauma, Research Essay, 2024, Alphacrucis University College.
[40] Chrisopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase, 'Defining "Trauma" as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation,' in E. Boase & C. Frechette (eds) *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (SBL Press, 2016), 4.

which to interpret Scripture. Trauma studies can also include the mechanisms that facilitate resilience.[41] The compounding factors of the long-term enslavement of the Israelites, the terror evoked by the threat of Pharaoh's armies at the Red Sea, and their crossing through the water, would certainly qualify the Exodus as a traumatic event. Dance offers the opportunity to symbolize the trauma in bodily expression, particularly when words cannot adequately capture their experience. Instead, trauma can be processed through physical expression. Dance can also importantly represent their newly found freedom and hope for the future through its bodily expression. This may allow them to enter their new community and covenant life without unprocessed trauma undermining their potential wellbeing and new life together.

The transformation of the Israelites in the Exodus narrative from slaves to survivors can be prophetically represented through dance as they interpret and make meaning of their past and imagine their future through bodily movement. The Israelites had been physically oppressed by Pharaoh, forced to endure the difficult but monotonous task of making bricks (Exo 5:6-8). But now they are free. They are now safe from Pharaoh and his army who have been destroyed. Their agency is restored. They are free to move in new ways and use their bodies not for bricks but for worship. This use of physical bodies for worship is reflected in the New Testament as Paul exhorts believers to "offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Rom 12:1).

The celebratory dance of Miriam and her community gives expression to the reality of the Israelite's liberation achieved by God.[42] While the dance follows the crossing of the Red Sea, it precedes the formalizing of their relationship with God in the Mosaic covenant at Sinai and the new community it forms. It also precedes the new covenant achieved by God through Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit in what is commonly referred to as a "new Exodus." Could Miriam's dance be a re-enactment of the Exodus for Israel as well as a triumphal celebration pointing to a future redemption for all humankind achieved through the victory of Jesus Christ on the cross? Is it this triumph on the cross, likened in the New Testament to a second Exodus, that Miriam also celebrates even though she may be unaware of the significance of her prophetic actions? After all, 1 Peter 1:10-12 tells us that the prophets preached the salvation of Christ to come, guided by the Spirit of Christ, without fully comprehending the revelation of which they spoke.

Yet, while Miriam initiates the dancing, she does not dance alone. She is joined by the women of her community. This requires participation, co-operation and relationship as the dancers engage with one another. The idea of dance also has a long history in the Christian tradition as an analogy for the Trinity. Developed by the Cappadocian fathers in the fourth century, the concept of perichoresis (sometimes referred to as the divine dance) aims to capture the relational interconnectedness and mutual indwelling of the Godhead. It pictures three persons of the Trinity engaged in an eternal, circular dance, in which each person

[41] Frechette and Boase, 'Defining "Trauma", 2. See this text for further exploration of the history of trauma hermeneutics in biblical studies.
[42] Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament,* 33.

remains distinct while they also are one. As we dance, we celebrate the Trinitarian God who has reached out and rescued us.

3.3 Singing

Thirdly, Miriam leads all the Israelites in song. In fact, Miriam commands all the people, both men and women, to "sing" (15:21). Miriam leads the people in a song that can be considered prophetic praise of God. The lyrics emphasize the destruction of the Egyptian army. God has done this wonderful work and therefore is to be "highly exalted." As the Israelites sing, Miriam's song breaks the power and bondages that have held the Israelites to Pharoah and his oppressive systems. Their singing makes their reality of liberation known and felt in their present moment. It is not just a cognitive recognition of their freedom but is arguably emotionally and physically felt through their singing and dancing. It is not a dream, nor a temporary reprieve from slavery. Their freedom is real and permanent. Their enemy has been defeated, "hurled into the sea" (Exo 15:1). Their perpetrator is no more. The song reinforces this new reality of freedom. This means the song has significance beyond its own time and place. This song can be re-used by subsequent generations to celebrate the defeat of an enemy and enslaver.

The lyrics to Miriam's song depict Pharaoh's army as a type or a symbol of oppression. Pharoah represents any oppressive regime or relationship that enslaves others. Breaking free of these bondages in an exodus-type experience is the first step towards liberation for the oppressed. According to Allan Boesak, Miriam's prophetic worship models non-violent resistance against all Pharaohs.[43]

However, the temptation Israel continually faced, and which the prophets continually challenged, was their tendency to be enamored with the power and prestige of the great nations – whether that be Egypt, Assyria or Babylon. Prophetic worship dismantles the false thinking that says Pharaoh is all-powerful and untouchable. In fact, such activity exposes the Pharaohs as impotent. Instead, new freedom is experienced. Prophetic worship energizes the community toward new hope and a new future in God. It represents transformation from oppression to liberty. A new community will be formed in the wilderness based on God's values and justice.[44] The liberative and prophetic worship prepares the people for this new reality as they dance off trauma and sing away oppression. The ritual and repetition of singing Miriam's simple refrain can advance the process of constructing meaning of their trauma.[45]

We will now turn to consider how the concept of prophetic worship, particularly using dance, has been adapted in some contemporary settings. These examples provide a sample of possibilities for communities seeking to integrate prophetic practices into their worship.

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[43] Allan A. Boesak, 'The riverbank, the seashore and the wilderness: Miriam, liberation and prophetic witness against empire'*, HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 73(4), a4547. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4547.

[44] Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* Rev Ed (Fortress Press), 3.

[45] Frechette and Boase, 'Defining "Trauma",' 7.

4. What can Miriam Teach us Today?

Exuberant singing and dance are often highlighted as distinct features of Pentecostal worship. The exuberance of early Pentecostal worship – lifting hands, clapping, dancing – resulted in much criticism in many contexts. Yet, the example of Miriam was utilized by early Pentecostals as biblical support for the practice of dancing in the Spirit to counter such criticism.[46] Yet, the passionate expressions of worship and dance of the early Pentecostals (and still utilized today in many congregations across the world), were arguably most influenced by the African-American forms of worship originating from the informal gatherings of African plantation slaves of the eighteenth century. [47]

The experience of the oppression and suffering of slavery by significant segments of the African-American community continued following the Proclamation of Emancipation. Craig Scandrett-Leatherman notes that from the Civil War to the 1930s, "the most common form of violence was lynching."[48] During this Jim Crowe era, new (or renewed) rituals of liberation emerged within the Church of God in Christ (COGIC)[49] in response to this oppression and attempt to de-humanize African American men.[50] In particular, dance in Afro-Pentecostal worship became a form of expressing non-violent resistance. Dance developed as an important ritual for Afro-Pentecostal men during this time as it provided a counter-response to the systemic ritual of lynching by their white oppressors. Dance and spirituality within the ecclesial spaces emerged as an act of resistance by providing agency to men. Afro-Pentecostals could move in a way that involved black style of dance, song, and worship; a "celebration of black ritual aesthetics."[51] Dance provided counter-cultural bodily expressions of freedom and victory not experienced in social contexts but found in Christ's death and resurrection. As Scandrett-Leatherman writes, "Afro-Pentecostals gave men the right to speak freely without uttering a word, and the right to move freely without serving a white master—the sweet rights of dancing in joy and victory."[52] The expression of dance at this time by Afro-Pentecostals can be considered a prophetic activity as it communicated a message of freedom and justice to give hope for the future of the African-American community.

Dance as therapy has also been utilized in contemporary contexts by African-American women who have experienced trauma. Kahlia Williams describes the use of liturgical dance in a congregational setting as a mechanism for women to experience freedom through their

[46] Isaiah C. Padgett, 'Murmurs and Miracles: A Pentecostal Reception History of Miriam the Prophetess,' *Pneuma* Vol 45 (2023): 252, 257.
[47] Wayne C. Solomon and Franco Crosby, 'Liberation in Black Urban Pentecostal Worship,' Presented at the 45th Annual Meeting of the Society for Pentecostal Studies Meeting, 6.
[48] Craig Scandrett-Leatherman, 'Rites of Lynching and Rights of Dance: Historic, Anthropological, and Afro-Pentecostal Perspectives on Black Manhood after 1895,' in Amos Yong & Estrelda Alexander (eds) *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture* (NY: New York University Press, 2011), 95.
[49] COGIC is the largest Pentecostal denomination in the USA with a predominantly African-American membership.
[50] Scandrett-Leatherman, 'Rites of Lynching and Rights of Dance,' 95.
[51] 109.
[52] 108.

physical movements that helped them to process and release the trauma carried in their bodies. As the worship engaged the participants in both their imaginative and physical senses, they expressed feelings of receiving God's love and grace. The impact, while not consistent, did alter the self (and community's) perceptions of many participants to address their intrinsic worth, particularly of their bodies. Dance as a therapeutic activity provided a way to express their pain of marginalization and (mostly) subsequent experience of inclusion in congregational life.[53] Therefore, Miriam's use of dance as a prophetic act and expression of freedom can provide a model for other communities and individuals seeking liberation from trauma.

Miriam models for us today prophetic expressions of dance and worship. The Exodus story is often utilized as a symbol of liberation for marginalized communities, past and present.[54] The experience of slavery in Egypt resonates with those who have similarly been oppressed, whether those bonds be social, political, psychological, physical or spiritual. Yet Egypt was not Miriam's future, nor should it be ours. In the Christian tradition, crossing the Red Sea is represented in the ordinance (or sacrament) of baptism. Believers leave the slavery of sin, are "buried" in the waters of the sea, and rise again to a new life and new identity in Christ. To prophetically dance, as Miriam danced, is to express bodily the liberation found in Jesus Christ.

There may also be times when dance provides an opportunity to prophetically "speak" a significant message to specific community. As for Miriam's community, the physical, embodied expression of worship and dance communicated their liberation. The prophetic message was performed through drumming, dancing and singing. Miriam interpreted the events of the Exodus revealing God's intention for their liberty and new life together as a redeemed community. In the same way, a prophetic message today may use dance or other physical forms of expression to communicate God's truth, justice and freedom.

[53] K.J. Williams, 'Love your flesh: The Power and Protest of Embodied Worship,' *Liturgy* (2020) Vol 35, Issue 1: 3-9.

[54] For example, the contemporary use of the Exodus as symbol of liberation in Black Theology in James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation,* 20th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990).