**Ezekiel 47: 1-12 as a Prime Model for/of Missional Worship: Life-giving water flows from the temple (place of worship)**

**Introduction**

This conference combines what was not in the so distant past seen as two different disciplines within theology and/or Christian life. Though both are part of practical theology, the one would fall under missiology and the other under worship and homiletics.

**Worship** was considered an activity within the church, the act of adoration, while **mission** was viewed as the way the church engages the world.

There were however a few studies conducted in the last decades attempting to bring closer worship and the life outside the worship space. Johan van der Merwe did his doctoral dissertation on *Liturgie en Lewe: ‘n sistematies-teologiese ondersoek* and Dirk Smit has more or less the same focus, but extending it to the field of ethics in his article, “Liturgy and life? On the importance of worship for Christian ethics[[1]](#footnote-1)”. In 1980, Geoffrey Wainwright’s seminal publication on Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life also argued in favour of an intrinsic relationship between liturgy and life.

In Worship: Adoration and Action, Miroslav Volf[[2]](#footnote-2) argues that Christian worship consists both in the joyful praise of God (worship) and in obedient service to God. This is a biblical imperative as stated in Hebrews 13: 15-16 “Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God”.

In my own doctoral research I have established the relationship between liturgy and spirituality, meaning that Christian liturgy has to impact on Christian life and vice versa[[3]](#footnote-3). Worship (the act of adoration), ought to feed the life outside the worship space.

Ion Bria, an Orthodox theologian, developed the notion, the liturgy after the liturgy[[4]](#footnote-4), which argues that while worship is the central act of the church, it does not stop there, because worship moulds one for mission, witness and service.

It is this relation which Ruth Meyer explores and affirms in her book, Missional Worship Worshipful Mission[[5]](#footnote-5), explaining it as “Gathering as God’s People, Going Out in God’s name”.

So, this Conference aims to foster, strengthens, and emphasizes the connection between liturgy and life. As stated in the brochure, this conference “will attempt to uncover how our liturgies direct and ground our actions in the world and shape and transform us to participate more deeply in the *missio Dei*, the mission of God.” Meyer underlines this in saying that the experience of God in worship forms people for participation in God’s mission in the world[[6]](#footnote-6).

**Life-giving water flows from the temple**

Thus I will work with the established premise that the act of worship cannot be detached from the life outside the worship space as it is inextricably connected. Worship in church should flow to worship outside church and impact on life itself. Hence I work within the frame of worship as lifestyle[[7]](#footnote-7) also, outside the church, indicating what Ezekiel 47:1-12 portrays as a picture of life flowing from within the temple outwardly.

Coming then to our text: It starts with Ezekiel receiving a vision of the new temple from chapters 40 – 46. We need to bear in mind that Ezekiel prophesies in a time when Israel was in Babylonian exile. From chapter 40 he sees how God will bring them back to Jerusalem, to the new temple. In the vision, there is a man with measuring rod, saying, “Mortal, look closely and listen attentively, and set your mind upon all that I shall show you, for you were brought here in order that I might show it to you; declare all that you might see to Israel.”

And then he started taking Ezekiel through the temple, as well as the attached and surrounding buildings, describing each part of the buildings in absolute detail. The crux of this scenario is in chapter 47 when the man takes Ezekiel to the entrance of the temple where something very strange is about to happen – water flows from below the threshold of the temple to the east. The important point here is that the water is flowing away from the temple. The man leads Ezekiel away in the direction that the water flows and measured every 500 metres. At every 500 metres he leads Ezekiel through the water. At the first 500m, the water is ankle-deep, the second 500m it is now knee-deep, the third 500m it is waist-high. At 2000m, it is so high that one needs to swim. At that point the man asks Ezekiel, have you seen this? And then he leads Ezekiel back along the riverbank.

If this was not strange enough, what Ezekiel sees on his way back, is out of the ordinary.

1. The water had formed a river.
2. On both sides of the river were trees full of fruit. Moreover, the leaves of the trees will not wither. It will bear fresh fruit every month. The reason: it is watered by the stream that flows from the sanctuary (temple). The fruit will be for food and the leaves will be for healing

Where else does this river, which emanates from the temple, flow?

It mouths in the Dead Sea, where the is no marine life, because of it salt content that is average five times higher than normal sea water. However, when this river flows into the Dead Sea, the water will become fresh and engender marine life. The eyes of the prophet’s faith can see even fishermen with their boats and nets, all the way from Engedi on the middle of its western shores to Eneglaim on the north.

Fishermen will occupy its shores which is about 80km in length and 16 km in width. The fish will be of as many kind as the Mediterranean Sea which is about more than 50 time bigger than the Dead Sea. Wherever the water flows, everything will become fresh.

Of great importance is the starting point of the river. It starts of as a small stream at the temple and miraculously grows into a river and creates freshness wherever it flows. This for me, is missional worship. In the words of Meyer, “Gathering as God’s People” (worship in the temple), “Going Out in God’s name” (participation in the mission of God).

The beauty in this vision of Ezekiel is that, only when he was taken to the furthest point (2000m), he could see the wonders of God’s grace upon his return. It is when we allow God to take us to furthest places from our comfort zones (worship spaces), that we fully realize what great impact we can have in society, in people’s life, how life-changing it could be – for those impacted on, and for ourselves.

This image encourages us to move outside of the public worship spaces, into the world. Public worship sends us out from the centre into the world, to be God’s people in the world with the purpose of reshaping the social life of Christians. The emphasis, according to Meyer, will then be the healing of brokenness, on reconciliation and on justice in the human community[[8]](#footnote-8). Healing, reconciliation, justice, restoration – these are the trees on both sides of the river which fruit will be food and its leaves will be used to heal. This splendid imagination vividly suggests the beneficent and life-giving influences that will stream forth from the Church of God upon the sick and famished souls of a dead and arid world.

This vision calls us to go to the real “Dead Sea” in our societies as a result of our public worship, to give life in “dead sea” circumstances. We must allow God to send us to the most uncomfortable and undesirable situations. We must go to the 2000 metres, otherwise we may miss out on the beauty of His wonders. It is God’s desire to restore all creation to wholeness and fulfilment. Let us worship God in such a way, that we be vessels that flows from our worship spaces into a little stream that becomes a river and flows into the “dead seas” of our lives that brings healing, joy, and restoration to a broken world.

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1. This article of Dirk Smit was published in *Scriptura* 62, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See his article, “Worship as Adoration and Action: Reflections on a Christian Way of Being-in-the-World”, in *Worship: Adoration and Action*, ed. By D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), p.207 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jacobus Bezuidenhoudt. *Liturgy and Spirituality in the Ecumenical Movement: A Systematic-Theological Evaluation*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Stellenbosch. 2010. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ion Bria, *The liturgy after the liturgy: mission and witness from an Orthodox perspective* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Published in 2014 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. p.30 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Among others, Miroslav Volf, further develops this notion in his article, “Worship as Adoration and Action: Reflections on a Christian Way of Being-in-the World” in Worship: Adoration and Action, ed. By D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993) p.1-2. Raimundo Panikkar, in *Worship and Secular Man* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973) argues in favour of this connection by suggesting that worship cannot exist only on what he calls “the transcendental plane”, but that there has to be a congruency between what we believe and what we re-enact in our daily living. Worship therefore becomes a way of life. p.56 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ruth Meyers, Missional Worship: Worshipful Mission (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)