

**EZEKIEL'S 'LATTER-DAY PSALMS': THE PSALMS OF MODERN  
TIME AND CLIME**

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**Abstracts**

*The title poem 'Latter-Day Psalms' is a collection of ten poems providing a modern interpretation of ten Biblical Psalms. The Poems concerned with immediate, the present and the real situation. Ezekiel is not ready to surrender human identity and human responsibility. The poet advocates the involvement in life. To him God belongs to all and salvation is not the right of some chosen people. He translates the language of faith into existential experience. The poet conveys the idea that God helps those who help themselves. The Old conventions, parables and scriptures cannot provide readymade solutions to the modern problems. The poet disapproves of the way people make division of men into virtuous and wicked. Ezekiel attempts to rewrite the psalms to make it more meaningful in the present context.*

**KeyWords:** *Psalms, Salvation, Lord, shepherd, evil, Philistia, disobedience, Faith*

## **EZEKIEL'S 'LATTER-DAY PSALMS': THE PSALMS OF MODERN TIME AND CLIME**

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Nissim Ezekiel's 'Latter-Day Psalms' is a collection of ten poems 'which are replies to the Old Testament Psalms' (King 105), he wrote in 1987 during a visit to Rotterdam as the invitation of the Arts Council of Rotterdam. In an interview with Malavika R. Khanna, Ezekiel states:

It was the total silence of my hotel room that made me want to write. I had no reading material with me. But there was a copy of the Gideon Bible beside by bed. I read some of my favorite passages from Jonah and Job, then turned to the Psalms. I've had a special relationship with them since the age of twelve. a dissenting relationship which had been suppressed. Feelings stretching over 40 years suddenly crystallized. Before leaving Rotterdam, I had completed nine Latter-Day Psalms, the tenth and concluding one being written in Berlin(Narayan 35).

'Latter-Day Psalms' is a remarkable poem sequence which provides the title of this book is a modern interpretation of nine of the Biblical Psalms. Ezekiel tries to reshape certain psalms. ( viz. I, 3, 8, 23. 60, 78, 95, 102 and 127) of the Book of the Psalms - a constituent of the old Testament, in humanistic and modern terms. P. K.J. Kurup observes, 'all the ten 'Latter-Day Psalms' recondition in one way or the other the Biblical Psalms according to theclimatic condition of the twentieth century consciousness which is compelled to more concerned with the immediate, the present and the real' ( 93). He does not sing the song of God's perfection. His attitude towards God is unorthodox and unadoring.

The 'Latter Day Psalms' however, expresses an altered sense of values. Ezekiel speaks against 'the counsel of the conventional'. The comparison of Ezekiel's first psalm with the Biblical Psalms I is illuminating. The Biblical Psalm I begins :

Blessed is the man that walketh not in the Counsel of

the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners,  
nor sitteth in the seat of scornful.

Ezekiel instead, thinks:

Blessed is the man that walketh  
not in the counsel of con-  
ventional, and is at home with  
sin as with a wife. He shall  
listen patiently to the scorn-  
ful, and understand the sources  
of their scorn. ( *Latter Day Psalms* 39)

'Ezekiel advocates involvement in life, with all its good and' evil; he is against running away from confrontation with evil. He wants us to 'understand' the sources of the scorn of the scornful.' (Narayan 35). He says there is no meaning in meditating day and night but one's involvement in action is important. 'He does not meditate day / night on anything; his delight/ is in action'. The poet rationalises this idea thus:

Rare is the man whose fruit is  
in his season. Yet, his leaf  
must wither, and that which  
appears to prosper, is often  
dying at the root. (39)

The implication of the above lines is that every animate is subject to decay with the passage of time. As man grows mature, he attains wisdom, but at the same time he becomes physically weak and fragile. Akshay Kumar admits that 'prosperity at one level is always accompanied by decay at another level. The poet understands this

bitter truth of life and therefore, as a wise and rational man rules out the very idea of immortality'(8).

'Latter Day Psalm II' corresponds to number 3 in the Book of Psalms is a social rendering of a personal prayer. The poet writes here:

Be thou a shield for  
them as for me.  
I cried unto the Lord, and so did  
they; hear us out of thy holy  
hill. Save us from ourselves. ( 40 )

Ezekiel bridges the distinction between 'me' and 'they' in invoking the Lord for protection of all. The Biblical Psalms 3 ends with "Salvation belongeth unto the Lord : thy / blessing is upon thy people' The poet reviles against the Lord's smiling his enemies and breaking of 'the teeth of ungodly'. He says that God belongs to all and salvation is not only the right of some chosen people. He respects all the churches and says,

Salvation belongeth unto the  
Lord, It is not through  
one or other Church.  
Thy blessing, is upon  
all the people of the earth. ( 40 )

'Latter-Day Psalm III' corresponds to psalm number 8 of The Book of Psalms. The Psalm 8 of the Bible says:

Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings  
hast thou ordained strength because of thine  
enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and

the avenger.

Ezekiel replies the Bible's bombastic declaration with cool irony. He is an intelligent prayer-maker. Ordaining strength out of the mouth of babes and sucklings is all right. He says, 'So I shall listen to them' and 'The enemy and the avenger have / nothing to do with it'. He conceives man-

For thou hast made him both higher  
and lower than the angels,  
whose existence if not certain.  
The crown of glory and honour  
sits uneasily on his head. ( 41)

Akshay Kumar considers, 'Surely this is a reflection of experience as against the poetry of faith (or Psalms ). Ezekiel translates the language of faith into that of existential experience(10).' The Psalms 8 declares 'Thou madest him to have dominion over the work of thy hands.' However, Ezekiel comments as man's destruction of natural habitat and environmental pollution :

What have we done with the dominion  
thou hast given us? What are the doing to the sheep and the  
oxen and the beasts of the field,  
the fowl of the air and the fish  
of the sea ? ( 41 )

'Latter-Day Psalms IV' is an adaptation of psalm number 23 of the Book of the Psalms. This is a psalm of David, which asserts that 'the Lord is my shepherd'. Ezekiel is not at all happy with this shepherd-sheep analogy. He pertinently asks, 'Is the Lord my Shepherd?' The irony in 'Baa, Baa Black / Sheep' of Latter-Day Psalms obviously proves that men are not sheep. Ezekiel is not ready to surrender human

identity and human responsibility. The verse in the Biblical psalm — 'He maketh me to the lie ..... 'describes God's benevolence to him in making him lie down in green pastures and leading him beside still waters. To this Ezekiel replies,

I lie down in green pastures, beside  
the still waters. Lead me  
away from these into thy  
work. (40)

Ajit Khullar comments, 'this makes more sense to a self-respecting man who wants to be led from idleness to work' (224). The poet further adds — 'When my soul is restored, / I walk the path of self - / righteousness'(42) He does not like the idea that 'I fear no evil'. 'Ezekiel does not indulge in common, religious clichés and presumptions such as 'God is great'. 'God is benevolent', 'God is kind', 'God', is merciful' etc.' (Kumar 11). He changes the tone from 'I shall dwell in the house of Lord / for ever ' to a modest and yet self-respecting one

I shall not expect goodness  
and mercy all the days of  
my life, even if I dwell  
in the house of the Lord. ( 42 )

Laxmi Raghunandan observes, 'The God is to Ezekiel, a Deity, that bestows consolation, comfort and encouragement in times of trial but not One from whom he can expect goodness and mercy all through life' (28).

In 'Latter-Day Psalm V', Ezekiel 'readapted to the hard realities of Jewish situation over a long period. Instead of longing for valour and victory for ever over the enemies; he sings, matter-of-factly' (Khullar 224). The poet acknowledges the reality and says,

It is nowhere said by King  
David that God is on the



side of the big battalions.

Philistia triumphs because of thee,

or by an irony, over thee. ( 43 )

He does not underestimate the strength and power of his enemies. 'We do valiantly, and so do/ our enemies' obviously implies the attitude of peaceful coexistence rather than that of religious triumph.

'Latter-Day Psalm VI' is a readaptation of psalm number 78 of the Book of Psalms. God had made the law in Israel to be followed by successive generations so that they might set their hope in God and keep his commandments and not rebel as their forefathers had done. In spite of God's miracles, the Israelites did not believe in Him. Their persistent disobedience brought down the vengeance of the Lord and they were afflicted by pestilence, death and war, yet finally the Lord delivered them from their troubles and choosing David as their leaders, he guided them with His own Hands. Ezekiel does not perceive God as a harsh and dictatorial Being. He says:

Give ear to new parables, unlike

the old ones, and to darker

saying than our fathers passed

on to us. ( 43 )

Akshaya Kumar says, 'the poet underlines the change of human situations, of forms of good and evil. Therefore, we cannot rely on old conventions, old parables to solve modern problems; old text, scriptures can no longer be treated as readymade solutions to modern international problems' (12).

'Latter-Day Psalm VII' opens with 'Come, let us make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.' (44 )The 'joyful noise' of the holy psalm turns into 'different noise' in Latter-Day Psalms. The poet accepts the supremacy of God, for His creations - 'the depth of the earth' and 'the heights of the mountains' are the works of the Lord.

Ezekiel does offer thanks to the Lord but with a difference :

The sea is his, we may drown  
init. He formed the dry land,  
on which many trillions thirst  
to no end. ( 44 )

The poet concludes this psalms by saying -'Psalmist exaggerates as usual' (45).

'Latter-Day Psalm VIII' is based on 102 Psalm 'a prayer of the afflicted, when he is overwhelmed, and poureth out his complaint before the Lord'. Ezekiel agrees that he is lonely:

I am like a pelican of the wild -  
erness. like an owl of the de-  
sert, like a sparrow alone  
upon the house top - but not in  
misery.( 45 )

The poet further says, 'I forget to eat my bread' but not as a miserable destitute who is 'withered like grass'. He does it as rational being for 'worthy causes'. The following lines throw comprehensive light on how the poet worships the God who regards the prayers of all who invoke him in time of need.

I worship the God who regards  
the prayer of the destitute,  
who hears the groanings of the  
prisoner, and of those who are  
appointed to death. ( 45 )

The poet accepts the condition of humanity and assures that his 'Children shall continue, / and their children shall / continue - '( 46 ) the condition of humanity..



'Latter-Day Psalm IX' takes after the psalm 127 of the Book of Psalms. Ezekiel argues for human endeavour. He conveys the idea that God helps those who help themselves. It is change from primary faith onto ultimate action-human experience than God's blessings.

...it is better to build  
them to abstain from building,  
and no labour is altogether  
in vain. (46)

Ezekiel does not accept the conventional idea that children are 'the fruit of the womb' — the gift of God. He reacts:

Children are as arrows in  
the hands of a mighty man,  
but not every man is mighty.  
Lo, children are an heritage  
of the Lord, but a quiver  
full of them is not essential  
for happiness. ( 46 )

'The Latter Day Psalm-X' corresponds to the Psalm 150, the last in the Book of Psalm is a 'comment on the previous nine as well as on the 150 Old Testament Psalms' ( Khanna 13 ). The concluding Book of Psalm reads — 'Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord'. Ezekiel thinks otherwise. He begins his concluding psalm —

All that fuss about faith,  
all those decision to praise  
God, the repeated appeals,

denunciations, laments and hopes,  
the division of men into virt-  
uous and wicked ! ( 46- 47)

The poet disapproves of the way people make divisions of men into virtuous and wicked. Ezekiel in his 'Jewish consciousness' perceive-

God is presence here  
and his people are real  
I see their sin. I hear  
His anger. (47)

This kind of realisation helps the poet to complete Latter Day Psalms. He concludes the psalm — '

Now I am through with  
the Psalm; they are  
part of my flesh. (47 )

Ezekiel's 'Latter Day Psalms' is an attempt to rewrite the psalms to make it more meaningful in present context' (Raghunandan 25) . His 'constant stress is on humanism as his basic belief' (Shahane29 ). Thus, B. N. Prasad observes, 'Ezekiel's attitude to the Biblical psalms is not dismissive. It is creative, and old moulds are used to convey new experience' (135 ) . The 'Latter Day Psalms' is a remarkable reinterpretation of the Biblical Psalms for modern man. The poet has used old moulds to convey new experiences.

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