



Nissim Ezekiel : The Modern Psalmist with an Approach of a Neo-Humanist

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The Biblical Psalms are more relevant in the context of religion and God. Anything that disregards God and religion is an insult to the Almighty. Nissim Ezekiel is a neo-humanist who has a mind coloured with rabid utilitarianism. He is against the conventionalism and therefore, he reads The Biblical Psalms in the light of the modern humanism as is interpreted by great thinkers and leaders. To achieve his objective he makes a topsy-turvy change in the traditional Psalms. A comparison of the traditional Psalms and the parodied psalms as given by Ezekiel will be greatly refreshing to any researcher. Below are given the traditional Psalm1 and its conversion by Nissim Ezekiel. The Biblical Psalm1 runs as follows :

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 the scornful.
But his delight is in the law of
the LORD; and in his law doth he
meditate day and night.(P1,1-8)

The Ezekielian psalm runs as follows :

Blessed is the man that walketh
not in the counsel of the 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.

He does not meditate day and night on anything; his delight is in action.(I,1-10)

Ezekiel feels that a man who lives with sin as with a wife, is Blessed. Sin is pleasant only at the face of it, but inherently it is painful.

Mahatma Gandhi being a great humanist says, “Hate the sin and not the sinner” and Nissim Ezekiel says blessed is the man who “is at home with/sin as with a wife”(3-4). He can enjoy the sin and in this way he will have understanding and tolerance which are a kind of pavement towards salvation. The real life is a mixture of good and evil. It is not purely good nor is it purely evil. Therefore, Ezekiel writes that Blessed is the man who listens patiently to the scornful and tries to understand the sources of their scorn. Again, Blessed is the man who “does not meditate day and/night on anything; his delight/ is in action”(8-10). To be in action is the chief quality of a utilitarian and modern day humanist. The modern-day humanist advises the marriage of contemplation and action.

The conventional teaching of The Bib., which has been coming down from many centuries and generations, is that the religious minded and holy people prosper while the unholy and ungodly perish:

The ungodly are not so but
are like the chaff which the wind
driveth away.(P1,14-16)

Such a teaching is based on what was true during the centuries when The Bib. came into being. However, the experience and observation of Nissim Ezekiel prove that in the present day world the unholy and ungodly prosper while the righteous and godly are hounded by the adverse circumstances. They are forced to live a life which by no means is worth living in the modern context. They are forced to face the toil and tribulation. The living example is the life history of Mahatma Gandhi himself. Ezekiel says :

The ungodly are in the same condition, no more like the chaff which the wind driveth away than the godly.(I,16-19)

The Biblical Psalm is based on the kindness and protective power of God. God punishes the wrong doers and protects the godly from the mischievous mind of the ungodly. The conventional Psalm 3 runs as follows :

Arise, O LORD: save me, O my
God : for thou hast smitten all
mine enemies upon the cheek bone:
thou hast broken the teeth of the
ungodly.(P3, 18-22)

However, Nissim Ezekiel in his usual mocking tone turns this psalm into a spoof. He says:

How can I breathe freely if
thou breakest the teeth of
the ungodly?(II, 13-15)

Anyway, Ezekielian treatment of this psalm is more tolerant, more permissive and shows his catholicity of mind more than that of the psalmist who wrote The Biblical Psalms. It shows Ezekiel's considerateness, sympathy and humanity which stand in sharp contrast to the vengeful mind of the original Biblical psalmist.

It was greatly and firmly believed that people who follow papacy of Rome were under the kindness of God as the original psalm given in The Bib. says:

Salvation belongeth unto the
LORD: thy blessing is upon thy
people.(P3,23-25)

But Nissim Ezekiel widens the scope. He says being a follower of church of Rome or National church of England does not make any difference for the bestowal of God's kindness. His clear cut view is expressed by his following psalm :

Salvation belongeth unto the
Lord. It is not through
one or other Church.
Thy blessing is upon
all the people of the earth.(II,16-20)

It is about time one removed the persistent doubt and curiosity why Nissim Ezekiel disagrees at various points with the original psalms and disagrees so much that he baptizes his psalms as *Latter-Day Psalms*? The rational and logical answer seems to be that Ezekiel is more inclusive in so far as the criticism of modern day tendencies is concerned. The eighth Biblical Psalm runs as follows :

Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet:(P8,21-24)

But alas! What God created for man to make him ever the more happy, has been ruined by man himself in the worst kind of simian fashion so much that the nectar has become poisonous to kill the same man who was favoured by God by conferring on him the best things created by Him. In fact, man is responsible for the Green House Effect and pollution with its concomitant effects. Nissim Ezekiel has poetised the whole situation in the following psalm:

What have we done with the dominion thou hast given us? What are we doing to the sheep and the oxen and the beasts of the field, the fowl of the air and the fish of the sea?(III,18-23)

Ditto, The Psalm 23 of The Bib. says, “ He (God) maketh me to lie down in/green pastures: he leadeth me be-/side the still waters”(P23,3-5). Nissim Ezekiel is not satisfied. He is a man of action. Therefore, in his *Latter-Day Psalms*, he says and wishes:

I lie down in green pastures, beside
the still waters. Lead me
away from these into thy
work.(IV,3-6)

Nissim Ezekiel, a man of action, like a rabid neo-humanist believes in the principle of action. Such a man like Ulysses in Tennyson’s poem seems to say: “How dull it is to pause, to make an end,/To rust unburnish’d not to shine in use”(22-23)!

Sometimes the psalms of The Bib. appear to rake the old wounds of Ezekiel’s forebears. For example, the following lines of The Bible open the old wounds. The lines of The Biblical Psalm 31 are: “Blessed be the LORD: for he/hath shewed me his marvellous/ kindness in a strong city”(P31,75-77). Ezekiel poses the question:

How long are we to rely
on those marvellous things
in ancient Egypt? Tell me of the

marvellous things in Nazi Germany.
Even with manna in our mouths,
we are not estranged from our lust.(VI,10-15)

Notes & References

- 1.** *The Holy Bible. Trans. King James,Cambridge university Press, London : Trinitarian Bible Society.2009, P1.*
- 2.** *Ezekiel, Nissim. Latter-Day- Psalms,Delhi: Oxford University Press.1982, P 252.*
- 3.** *Ibid., P 252.*
- 4.** *Op.Cit, P1.*
- 5.** *Op.Cit, P1.*
- 6.** *Op.Cit, P 253.*
- 7.** *Op.Cit, P3.*
- 8.** *Op.Cit, P 254.*
- 9** *Op.Cit, P3.*
- 10.** *Op.Cit, P 254.*
- 11.** *Op.Cit, P8.*
- 12.** *Op.Cit, P 255.*
- 13.** *Op.Cit, P23.*
- 14.** *Op.Cit, P 255.*
- 15.** *Tennyson, Alfred Lord. Ulysses.*
- 16.** *Op.Cit , P31.*
- 17.** *Op.Cit, P 257.*