We have so far considered Ezekiel's preoccupation with personal and secular themes involving the city, love, Nature and allied subjects. These do not afford a complete perspective of the multi-dimensional poet. He has made significant inroads into the sphere of the spiritual. The wide coverage accorded stimulates critical analysis after close and careful consideration and presents Ezekiel as a poet with an unmistakable spiritual bent.

The natural ease with which he proceeds to unburden his views, attitudes and sentiments is remarkable for its freshness and originality. Indeed it is evident that he is at his most honest, most lucid, most natural in this area of his poetry. And the degree of involvement is conspicuous. While the general tone of his poetry is visibly affected by real lack of involvement elsewhere, here surprisingly those shortcomings are
clearly absent and one encounters Ezekiel in his true element. Also, most of his poems on the subject have an appeal that one finds missing in his poetry on other subjects. The note of sincerity is present even in his early composition. *A TIME TO CHANGE.*

We who leave the house in April, Lord
How shall we return?

The same poem has a quotation from the Book of Revelation 4, 16 "So then because thou art lukewarm and neither hot or cold, I will spue thee out of my mouth." At this stage, it is relevant to note that this category of poetry is not adventitious but is the product of his profound contemplation on the subject. He has explored the area of the spiritual in a measure unparalleled by any other Indian poet in English. As earlier stated his introspective and analytical disposition stand him in good stead even in the spiritual domain and he articulates his views on the subject.
the latter being one of considerable significance and interest to him.

It is pertinent now to probe into his views and unravel his attitude. Prayer, for Ezekiel, is an essential component of spiritualism. Indulgence in prayer is frequent and almost instinctive without any attempt to impress or to counterfeit piety. It is easy to perceive the effortless manner in which he takes recourse to prayer.

The going forth
prepared with prayer
The timed return
Redeemed with prayer.

Prayer is an aspect of worship that he rates highly gauging from his repeated indulgence in it. His poem 'Prayer' illustrates the point well.

Guard my tongue from evil
Is a prayer within the reach of evil tongues. Indifference
Alone is unredeemable
The rest is faith, belief and truth
Pursued, at any rate, in prayer
That is all I know of prayer.
Prayer is an expression of faith and instrumental to self-expression, even a source of solace. What is baffling and perhaps a little incongruous too is that for a man who is generally sceptical in matters of God, and religion (in the conventional sense) prayer is rated highly and given much priority. Being highly unconventional, he would gladly dispense with tradition and all accepted norms of worship. Prayer stands out as a singular exception although on close observation it is not unlikely to perceive that even in his prayer, there is a strong streak of the typical non-conformist that he is. His idiosyncrasies and eccentricities are articulated in his prayer wherein he makes a deliberate effort to reiterate the fact of his non-conformist stand in several vital issues.

Many of Ezekiel's poems make use of the word, 'Prayer'. His 'Pastor Prayers' best illustrate his obsession for prayer. Prof. Shohano states that in the poems written in the early phase, the word 'Prayer' is used frequently to denote a feeling of genuine spiritual
commitment though this is very often modified by a kind of subtle scepticism and incisive irony. Several prayers are presented in a mock-humorous style where the poet attempts to cloak his sincerity albeit not very effectively. A wary reader is able to see through the garb and unravel his deep commitment and sincerity to the spiritual in one of its chief attributes. The apparent simplicity and the conversational tone of his prayer rules out the possibility of an afflatus behind such writings. It is certainly a point of merit that he deftly wields the colloquial idiom in such poems without, at the same time, attenuating them.

Prat. S. Kumar states, in this regard

Prayer has never been alien to Ezekiel's mode of writing—in fact he has used it in one form or other ever since he started writing poetry. As atheist, rationalist and unbeliever from 1942 to 1967, he seems to have lived through some varieties of religious experience. Since there is only a thin veil that separates negation from affirmation and doubt from faith, Ezekiel has now swung over to prayer as the most authentic mode of communication with the supreme Deity—

The resultant emotion in these 'Poster Prayers' is not of passive submission but of defiant questioning.
There is a genuine craving for essential goodness; he invokes the blessings of God to improve the quality of life around him. His mode is endearing and winsome is as explicit in his poem 'A Morning Prayer'.

Whatever the enigma
The passion of the blood
Grant me the metaphor
To make it human Good

The tone of his communication with God is casual and unpretentious. Ezekiel does not attempt to conceal his real self in a bid to appear pious and thereby more acceptable to God and to fellow-beings. His frank acknowledgement of his liabilities does not create a disparaging effect; rather his forthrightness is all the more commendable. In 'Theological' he states with no trace of inhibition

Lord, I am tired
of being wrong

Your truth
is too momentous for man
and not always useful
I've stripped off a hundred veils
and still there are more
That cover your creation,
Why are you so elusive?
---
Any way, at the moment,
I am very tired of it.

An indisputable fact that emerges is the role of the poet as a quester constantly in search of the right meaning and answer to the enigma that life essentially constitutes. In seeking to unravel the mysteries of life he is untiring in his efforts, obdurate even in his mission. His quest is quite fruitful though and he is enlightened on many important issues. He discovers the truth in a manner that is arduous and painful. He realises the imperative need to be exacting in his own ways of living and in his approach to life in general. Hence a genuine statement of his own disposition is convincing when he states in (Poster Prayers).

Kick me around
A bit more, O Lord
I see at last
There’s no other way
for me to learn
your simplest truths.
He hopes to unravel fresh areas of discovery in the realm of the spiritual, he wishes to gain new insights and widen his horizon so as to encompass in his final perspective an expansive and comprehensive view of life and God. He displays a passion for the truths of life. He would gladly dispense with the archaic and the obsolete and acquire a fresh outlook unaffected by prejudice and untainted by the dominant prevalence of conventionalism.

Denude me, O Lord
of all my stale wisdom
Keep me, if possible
from everything dated
Let my follies be fresh
as flowers,

Prayer is the medium which expresses his urgent need to chasten himself and attain a near-perfect conduct manifest in love and concern for fellow beings. All that is loathsome, he hopes to steer clear of.
Deliver me from evil, Lord
Rouse me to essential good
change the drink for me, O Lord
Lead me from the wailing wood.9

The description of life here as 'wailing wood'
is mildly reminiscent of Keats 'here, where men sit and
hear each other groan'. His attitude to the sordid
reality of life is not querulous but one of mature
acceptance. He hopes, by prayer, to the fortified in
encountering the odds of life. Prof. Shahane maintains,

Ezekiel's thinly philosophical poems, to a degree
like Auden's explore existence not by making mere
statements or clear or oblique assertion but by
involving the reader's sensibility into an
aesthetic process of exploration.10

Prof. Shahane refers, further, to a tension within
Ezekiel's personality which he feels gives rise to his
religio-philosophical poetry. Tension or conflict within
one's personality can, of course, result in a kind of
poetry. But to believe that all his religious poetry

is the outcome of tension seems to be an underestimation of the quality and content of this category of poetry. As is common in most thinking people, in Ezekiel too, there often occurs a conflict of ideas and principles. But such periods are resolved and doubts are settled by effective ways and means. It is clear that in the sphere of the spiritual, Ezekiel speaks his mind clearly, subjects all important issues to deep contemplation before his thoughts are articulated and most importantly takes a definite and decisive stand in the issue.

His Posta prayers are remarkable for their freshness and novelty of ideas and expression. As a new method of the poetic craft, they reveal the innovative spirit of the poet. The simple but profound thoughts are appealing and at the same time interesting; of course one should not demand too much from this kind of poetry where length and matter are drastically limited. The poet himself concedes that in maintaining the form of such poems, he was obliged to reduce its length and extent such that only an image was presented
or only a single idea expressed.

Expressing a similar viewpoint Prof. Kumar comments, "one need not here look for ingenious metaphors, subtle manipulations of the resources of language or vibrant creative imagination. There is unmistakable creativity here though of a different order. In these poems one encounters dramatic juxtaposition of polarities which carry one straight to the core of human experience shorn of all poetic embellishments". Consider, for instance the following poem as a fine example, typically representative of the deft style of his poems: Prayers.

The vices I've always had
I still have,
The virtues I've never had
I still do not have
from this Human way of Life
who can rescue Man
If not his Maker?
Do thy duty, Lord!

One notices that besides simplicity and clarity of expression, a single idea is expressed in a medium
which is very effective for the purpose. In this genre of poetry, undoubtedly Ezekiel commands an unmistakable mastery and in them he reveals his true self—his real sentiments, aspirations and apprehensions. The poet himself confirms the fact when he states,

The prayers, I feel, are in my true voice even when not poetry of a high or even moderately high order — — — I consider [*Poster Poems*] and the *Poster Prayers* taken together as a suitable expression of a phase in my poetic career. I would be less happy if something of this kind had not happened to me.13

The frank, confessional note in these poems make a deep and immediate impact on a sensitive reader. And the poems themselves are registered in the mind of such a reader long after they are read.

According to A.N. Whitehead, religion is, "what the individual does with one's solitariness"14. It is fascinating to note that his frequent indulgence in prayer notwithstanding, Ezekiel does not consider himself religious or spiritual at least not in the
conventional sense. Yet he exhibits a religio-philosophical awareness of the world. The poet states,

I do not get a sense of religion sustained from day to day. If I write a religious poem the next poem is likely to be secular, sceptical.15

When questioned about the precise nature of his spiritual outlook, the poet states,

The precise nature of my spiritual outlook, I can't say because I'm not adequately philosophical. I see glimpses of "the truth" which I then describe, comment on, laugh at, weep for etc. But I can't not yet any way, add it all up and say, "Here it is, my philosophy."16

Yet he cannot deny the fact that he is of an introspective and contemplative frame of mind nor can he deny that he is humanistic in his treatment of fellow beings. Referring to poster Prayers Ezekiel says,

The persona is that of the self-centred self which is strong in all of us. The tension and dialogue between that self and the poet's other self provide the inspiration."17
Adil Jussawala rightly states that Ezekiel's approach to life is one of "philosophical humanism" rather than religious, yet it is surprising to note, he says, how often the word 'Prayer' occurs in the work of such a poet. Even in his pastor Prayers, he finds it a little difficult to restrict himself to the chosen sphere of the spiritual and is intellectual—even mildly cerebral. This is an unconscious twist to the manner and style of his expression and is certainly unique.

A second prominent feature of the poetry in the spiritual dimension is that he is strongly against conventionalism in religion. He vehemently castigates elaborates rituals and manifestations of external piety and religious hypocrisy. Religion for him is covert and not overt. Where Ezekiel scores over other poets is in that he is concerned more with the spiritual than the religious. The non-ritual surfaces in his poetry. He is sardonic of all established traditions. While Sylvia
Plath is a confessional poet of the religious kind. Ezekiel is essentially of the spiritual kind. Although his poetry faintly resembles that of George Herbert, especially in his mode of prayer, yet he is different from Herbert too. The essence of spiritualism does not consist in pious adherence to rituals or external flourishes of worship for these are inconsequential, even trivial. In scrupulously observing these external deeds, one runs the greater risk of overlooking the importance of the essentials of spiritualism. The poem 'Guru' explains the point.

But then we learn
the saint is still a faithless friend,
obstinate in argument
ungrateful for favours done
hard with servants and the poor
discourteous to disciples especially men.

A pious man who is held in esteem and awe by the public is most often quite depraved for he has ingeniously avoided the observance of values which are far more important than indulgence in external acts of piety.
In this issue, Ezokiel is uncompromising. He is of the opinion that there are no substitutes for basic human values which ought to be the nucleus of all religions. He considers pseudo-saints, gurus and the like culpable for their game of deceit and their outrageous conduct.

According to Gatyanaara\'in Singh "Ezekiel is uncompromising. He is of the opinion that there are no substitutes for basic human values which ought to be the nucleus of all religions. He considers pseudo-saints, gurus and the like culpable for their game of deceit and their outrageous conduct."

The question of the individual ranged against establishment assumes a sharp and strident note when the poet has to cross the hurdles set by code of ethics or grapple with fossilized tradition. The complacent smugness and self-righteous stupor of bogus Godmen and fake artists disgusts him.

High priests of personal opinion or intermediaries between the absent God and their worshippers they scrape the barrel for a spoonful of hope.

Prof. Singh feels that Ezokiel's orientation towards spiritual themes may restrict the range and scope of his interest in life. This apprehension on his part seems baseless and unnecessary for while Ezokiel is engrossed in the domain of the spiritual he is actively involved
in the actual business of life and its varied problems. His tensions and conflicts in the spiritual sphere are firmly planted in the realities of life and he pursues his crusade with zest and vitality. All his utterances have their basis in the life of common man. His poems are seldom cut off from the mainstream of life and its realities. They have their roots in reality and they express the fundamentals of daily life. He is a champion of Justice, and exposes ruthlessly the sham and the hypocritical categories of society.

The oppressor who worships God and the oppressed who worship God are victims of the Enemy. They rot in families, in castes, in communities, in clubs, in political parties. They stay stable. They stay still. Their hands continue to keep down the young.

While the class of God men is ruthlessly castigated, the validity and effectiveness of the church to is challenged. Being a non-conformist, he is not inclined to view
the church as an effective agent of the faithful on earth or even as the right medium of spiritual pursuit.

He states candidly, in this context

I am not a religious or even a moral person in any conventional sense. Yet I've always felt myself to be religious and moral in some sense. The gap between these two statements is the existential sphere of my poetry.22

And true to his view, he confronts the validity of conventional norms preferring the individualised concepts to the institutionalised ones.

Likewise, he is sceptical about prophets and feels that they distort the Image of God and present an extremely fragmented picture to the masses who are always attune to the dictates of holy men. While prophets seek to depict the Almighty as powerful and vindictive, Ezekiel would personally prefer to consider the supreme Being as benign and benevolent and not as an Intimidating force that He is made to be. Perhaps the most modern
depiction of God as Father, Mother, Brother and Sister would appeal to the poet, for this explodes the myth of a supreme male God. It is because he has a picture of a kind of God that he is able to address him in a casual and informal manner of speech and address. May be this is deliberately worked out as a reaction to the conventional depiction of God as an awe-inspiring and callous force. And besides Ezekiel has to live up to his non-conformist stand!

His most recent poems in *LATTER DAY PSALMS* are to be considered at close and critical quarters to facilitate a deeper understanding of his approach to God and religion. According to him, the composition of this fascinating work occurred quite accidentally which he goes on to state at length in an interview with the *Indian Literary Review*.

Of late, I've found myself turning more deliberately to Jewish sources and themes as though some inner movement has required it. — — — In response to an invitation, I travelled to that poetry festival
in Rotterdam —— the only thing to read in the hotel room is the Gilion Bible. I read something from the old Testament —— I read the first Psalm —— I think I realised suddenly that I had never accepted the psalms and this crystallised into an answer to the first one. Within ten minutes, I'd written the first Latter-day psalm and formed the idea of writing ten.

Ideas and attitudes — highly individualistic are well defined in Ezekiel. He merely awaits the opportune moment to express them. The unusual and almost accidental manner in which the Psalms were composed besides making good reading, proves beyond doubt that the provocation for its composition had only to be a flimsy one. The fact that his approach was already well formulated is evident. The time was ripe for an outburst.

The third Psalm in the old Testament which corresponds with the second Psalm written by the poet is as follows:

I have so many enemies Lord so many who turn against me!
They talk about me and say
"God will not help him."
But you, O Lord, are always my shield
from danger
you give me victory
and restore my courage.

I call to the Lord for help,
and from his sacred hill he answers me.
I lie down and sleep
and all night long the Lord protects me.
I am not afraid of the thousands of enemies
who surround me on every side.
come Lord! save me, my God!
You punish all my enemies
and leave them powerless to harm me.
Victory comes from the Lord—
may be bless his people.

The psalm reveals the implorings and outcries of
one who desires to be constantly shielded by the Lord
so as to be protected from the possible onslaught of his
adversaries. The protagonist here obviously expects
exclusive and preferential treatment and makes a distinc-
tion between his enemies and himself. He hopes to be
singled out for preferential treatment by the Lord and
to this end he seeks the blessings of the Almighty.
The implication is that God redeems only a select few and leaves the rest of humanity to perdition. Ezekiel refutes this concept and refuses to accept a god who is instrumental in creating barriers among people. Reading the Psalms, he discovers several flaws and loopholes. He finds it impossible to accept the image of God as presented in the Psalms. Hence he states very sceptically:

Is this the way of God
or is it merely the way of a prophet?

He counters the authenticity of the third Psalm in the old Testament and presents his version which makes explicit his expansive approach to god and man.

Lord, few there are that trouble me, fewer still that rise up against me. 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.
I laid me down and slept;
I awoke, for the Lord
sustained me. Let every man,
woman and child sleep and
awaken, sustained by thee.
How can I breathe freely if
thou breakest the tooth of
the ungodly?

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

Humanity is basically a single, united unit and
owes allegiance to the same God. Any attempt to depict
a racial God distorts His real image and limits His
dimension. Man should outgrow barriers of caste, creed
and colour and identify the broad similarities of the
human predicament in general. In expecting exclusive
treatment only for oneself, one distorts the real
image of God. Ezekiel reviews the human situation and
reiterates the fundamental homogeneity of man. If man
today suffers anguish it is mainly owing to tensions
and conflicts within himself. In other words, man is
his own enemy. External pressures and onslaughts are fewer in comparison. Being altruistic, Ezekiel would deem it painful to perceive the agony of fellow beings if they are taken to task by God, while he himself enjoys happiness and tranquility. Let the bounteous gifts of God be distributed among all humanity. Similarly let His Mercy be showered on all people. This is what the poet desires. Going by the poet’s formula, let all humanity be punished for serious offenses.

Referring to the two works of Ezekiel, S.C. Narula says,

Hymns and Psalms are Ezekiel’s record of the analysis of the quality of religious thought, the upshot of modern man, experience of living, whose approach is to question the validity, of scriptural utterance — Biblical faith must stand the testing on the touchstone of life to be accepted as a valid guiding principle of life.

Ezekiel has used the first person singular in his Psalms, retaining their original form. Narula believes that it represents the attitude of modern man. But we
see it is a dubious point, for, while Ezekiel speaks generally for the human condition and expresses what man in general feels or is supposed to feel but is unable to express in keeping with Pope's "That oft was thought, but never so well expressed," he might be speaking his own mind and thinking his thoughts aloud. If this is true, it is possible for like-minded persons to identify themselves with his thoughts. In all probability, Ezekiel has not arrived at his own intricate thoughts after profound analysis and meditation and hence to confidently equate his views with that of man in general is to demean the finer aspects and sensibilities of the poet.

He prefers a life of concrete action to one of unfruitful, idle meditation. Hence he says,

He does not meditate day and night on any thing; his delight is in action.

It is a misconception to believe that the Psalms exhibit more confrontation to accepted norms.
There is instead a considerable amount of soul-searching.

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, fowl of the air and the fish of the sea?

Holding interrogations — a series of them, Dogerously, he implies that man himself is largely responsible for his own deplorable condition. Religion and convention have been ineffectual in solving basic human problems; they have only exaggerated divisions among men. Narula says,

aware that the history of man is bloodied by religious fanaticism. Ezekiel, by his empathetic human approach to faith, exhorts man to rise above narrow confines of his own religion and protection of his God. He seems to suggest that in being the children of God, we are all brothers, whatever our religious commitments may be, and we shall find protection in the same God.

Ezekiel craves for a greater relevance and applicability of conventional religion to the human
situation, particularly to the aspect of human agony and despair. In Psalm 6, he says with great feeling:

How long are we to rely
on these 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.

He portrays the supreme Being as benevolent, magnanimous, sympathetic and above all loving. He is and ought to be responsive to the bemoanings of this suffering people.

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.

A fundamental requisite for any rightly motivated spiritualist is a caring attitude. Only an altruistic concern is of urgent need. Doctrines, philosophies and religious conventions may be confined to the background.
only a human approach lends to doctrines and dogmas authenticity. Mother Teresa is an exemplar in this respect. Her genuine caring attitude, compassion and the loftiness of her mission pales all religious doctrines into insignificance. She has practised self-denial to such an extent that only concern for fellow beings remains. The nature and extent of her work speaks volumes for her philosophy of God and religion.

Everyone understands
Mother Teresa
It’s not the mythology
or the marriage custom
that you need to know
It’s the will to pass
through the eye of a needle
to self-forgetfulness.

One has to overcome the strong inclination of being egocentric that is present in everyone. This is a stumbling block in the path of one’s progress and real self-development. Most religious doctrines do not elicit instinctive appreciation because they they are not totally relevant to the present human
situation. He himself is acutely conscious of his limitations, more so, of the urgent need to chasten himself and be relieved of the streak of concupiscence. All human experience should possess a chastening effect and purge one of sin and error so that one becomes not merely sadder and wiser as the saying goes but more acceptable to God, humanity and to oneself. This dissatisfaction with himself is a strong indication that Ezekiel is a man constantly evolving, constantly growing into a finer mould. Besides, he is always in quest of values which help to enrich the quality of life. In his 'Poster Prayers' he states.

Respect for the near
affection for the familiar
these I have learnt
late but not too late
Let me never lose them, Lord. 34

He firmly believes that the loftiest doctrine in any religion is love and concern for fellow-beings.

It is the task
of love
and imagination
to hear what can't be heard
when everybody speaks,
If one is dauntless and eager to explore the mysteries of life, one is likely to arrive at certain truths which impart to life greater meaning and purpose. What is important is the spirit of seeking to unravel the hidden truths of life.

All you have is the sense of reality unfathomable as it yields its secrets slowly one by one.

He is gifted with a rare quality of insight. It is this which rejects conventional wisdom. He would rather arrive at his own truths which carry the strength of conviction and experience. It is possible by rejecting conventional wisdom to arrive at truths which are more profound and have a greater immediacy to the present situation. Ezekiel refutes stale wisdom thus,

Don't curse the darkness since you're told not to
but don't be in a hurry
to light a candle either
The darkness has its secrets
which light does not know
It's a kind of perfection
while every light
distorts the truth.

This seems to be the principle on which he works
in an attempt to unravel the secret of mysteries. It
also indicates precisely the nature and approach of
his outlook and attitude to life in general. The dark-
ness of unexplored mysteries is only apparently dark
and unrevealing—it hides a wealth of secrets within-
secrets of truth that await exposure. The conventional
interpretation of candle and light is thus safely dis-
pensed with because they do not contain fresh wisdom.
The truth they convey is an over-ridden cliche.
Szokiel obviously has clear distaste for such abused
truths. Confirming his preference for and faith in
certain abstractions of life, he says,

Now again I must declare
My faith in unseen, unheard
The inner music, undertone
The silence of a daily friend
The dignity of trust, the fervour of an unerring choice, the hidden sacrifice.

Considered briefly, his thoughts, sentiments, and expressions embody the essence of all great religious teachings — Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism. There is essentially a craving for a humanism that encompasses all humanity. It is important to note that the virtues of love, charity, and compassion form the crux of the religion he advocates.

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NOTES

1. JSAL, P. 11.
3. Ibid, P. 54.
4. Shiv Kumar: Poster Prayers of Nissim Ezekiel
   JSAL, P. 263.
6. JSAL, P. 99.
7. Ibid, P. 133.
10. Vasant A. Shahan: The Religious - Philosophical
    strain in Nissim Ezekiel's Poetry, JSAL, P.P. 255, 261.
11. Shiv Kumar: Poster Prayers of Nissim Ezekiel
    JSAL, P. 264.
12. JSAL, P. 133.
    P. 26.
15. Nissim Ezekiel in and Interview with John B.Beston
    World Literature Written in English, April, 1977.


22. Nissim Ezekiel: In a letter to Vasant Shahane, JSAL, P. 261.

23. Nissim Ezekiel: In an Interview with the Indian Literary Review.

24. Good News Bible: Published by The Bible Society of India, Bangalore 1977, P. 539.


27. S.C. Narula: Negative Affirmations in Ezekiel's Hymns and Psalms, P.P. 60, 64.


29. Ibid, P. 41.

32. Ibid, P. 45.
34. JSAL, P. 132.
37. Ibid, P. 59.
38. JSAL, P. 55.