

Emma Lazarus

1849-1887

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Most famous for *The New Colossus*, her sonnet welcoming the hordes of immigrants to America, Emma Lazarus was a American-born Jew of colonial Sephardic and German Jewish stock. Part of a literary circle that included Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter, Emily Dickinson's proctor, and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and having written and translated poetry from girlhood, Lazarus evolved into a Jewish American poet who combined the contradictory forces of Jewish peoplehood and Puritan America, of Hebraism and Hellenism, to create a highly cultured expression of Jewish American identity for the new masses.

Born on July 22, 1849, the fourth of the seven children of Esther Nathan Lazarus and Moses Lazarus, a sugar merchant and descendant of the original Sephardic settlers in New Netherland, Emma Lazarus enjoyed the luxury of spending winters in New York City and summers in Newport, Rhode Island. Her parents hired private tutors, who taught the Lazarus children literature, music, and languages (French, German, and Italian). And Emma and her sisters were members of Julia Ward Beecher's Town and Country Club, where the members discussed science and literature. Her family belonged to Shearith Israel, a Sephardic congregation in New York City.

Lazarus's ambitions as a writer began when she was young. In 1866, when Lazarus was seventeen, her father privately printed her first book *Poems and Translations: Written between the Ages of Fourteen and Sixteen*. Soon afterward, Lazarus met Ralph Waldo Emerson, and they began a correspondence as pupil and mentor that lasted until 1882, when Emerson died.

Lazarus' second book, *Admetus and Other Poems*, appeared in 1871 and her novel, *Alide: An Episode in Goethe's Life*, in 1874. She published a verse drama, *The Spanoletto*, in 1876. Throughout the 1870s and 1880s, she published poems, essays, letters, and a short story in popular American magazines and newspapers such as *Scribner's*, *Lippincott's*, the *Century*, and the *New York Times*.

Between 1882 and 1884, Lazarus's essays appeared frequently in the weekly *American Hebrew*, her most famous one being *An Epistle to the Hebrews*, a series of open letters that urged American Jews not to take their privilege and security for granted and advocated that Eastern European Jews immigrate to Palestine. Her well-received book of translations, *Poems and Ballads of Heinrich Heine*, came out in 1881 and her own poems, *Songs of a Semite: The Dance to Death and Other Poems*, in 1882.

Lazarus toured England and France in 1883, where she met English poet Robert Browning and poet, artist, and socialist

William Morris as well as other luminaries, including Jewish leaders. After her father's death, Lazarus returned to Europe in May 1885 and traveled in England, France, Holland, and Italy through September 1887. She died of cancer in New York in November 1887. Two of her sisters, Mary and Annie, published the posthumous two-volume *Poems of Emma Lazarus* in 1888, which includes a biographical sketch, the first published piece by her elder sister, the essayist Josephine Lazarus; Emma's translations of medieval Hebrew poets such as Judah Halevy; and her last work, prose poems entitled *By the Waters in Babylon*.

Lazarus's earliest poem with a Jewish theme, first published in 1867 and reprinted in *Admetus and Other Poems* (1871), *In The Jewish Synagogue* at Newport was written in answer to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem *The Jewish Cemetery at Newport*. While Longfellow, speaking as a philo-Semite, stands in the cemetery and declares that the earliest

New World Jews have left but dead monuments to a once-living faith and peoplehood, Lazarus, echoing Longfellow's quatrains but speaking with the collective voice of American Jews, enters the oldest extant American synagogue next to the graveyard. Although she finds it empty of present life, Lazarus nonetheless asserts the continuity of Judaism, for “the sacred shrine is holy yet” to the Jews living in America.

Most scholars agree that Lazarus's public identity as a Jewish writer emerged with the huge influx of Eastern European Jews after the 1881 pogroms in Russia. At this time, she began to study Hebrew seriously and worked for the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society as an advocate for Jewish immigrants on Wards Island. And she became involved in establishing the Hebrew Technical Institute and agricultural communities for the immigrants in the United States.

Throughout her life, Lazarus balanced her American literary identity against her alliance with Jewish causes. In her

essays on American literature (1881), Longfellow (1882), and Emerson (1882), she defended the new American literary tradition. Initially cautious, Lazarus became outspoken as a Jew in her writing. She protested, in *Songs of a Semite* (1882), both anti-Semitism as *The Crowing of the Red Cock*, in which she decries Christian anti-Semitism, *The Banner of the Jew*, where she reminds unaffiliated Jews of their strong ties to their forebears Moses, King David, and the Maccabees. Her challenge as a poet was to combine her Jewish and American literary loyalties.

In *The New Ezekiel*, Lazarus, in her retelling of the messianic prophecy of the biblical Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones, expresses her proto-Zionist vision.

Although her sister Josephine characterized Emma as “a true woman, too distinctly feminine to wish to be exceptional, or to stand alone and apart, even by virtue of superiority,” Lazarus protested such a role. The sonnet *Echoes*, written

around 1880, addresses the limitations put upon the woman poet, who, because she is “veiled and screened by womanhood,” cannot sing “the might / Of manly, modern passion” or “the dangers, wounds, and triumphs of the fight.” Despite these social limitations, the woman poet's “wild voice” echoes throughout nature, “answering at once from heaven and earth and wave,” omnipresent and powerful.

The sonnet 1492 addresses the double-edged irony for the Jews of that famous year, when Spain's Jews were expelled from that land and Christopher Columbus discovered America.

In 1883, Lazarus was invited to write a poem for a literary auction to raise funds to build the pedestal for the huge Statue of Liberty Enlightening the World by the French sculptor F. A. Bartholdi. Her entry, *The New Colossus*, was published in the *Catalogue of the Pedestal Fund Art Loan Exhibition at the National Academy of Design* to raise more funds; only in 1903 was it inscribed on a bronze tablet and displayed inside the

pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. The sonnet recasts the classical Greek Colossus of Rhodes, a representation of the pagan sun god, as the “Mother of Exiles,” an American version of Deborah, the Mother in Israel in the Book of Judges. Rather than conqueror of the world, this mother is the welcoming, nurturing, and comforting presence of American democracy.