

THE NEW COLOSSUS

EMMA LAZARUS
1883

TEXT

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand A
mighty woman with a torch, whose flame*

*Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand*

*Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command The
air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame. "Keep,
ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she With silent
lips. "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled
masses yearning to breathe free,*

*The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send
these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my
lamp beside the golden door!*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What does the Statue of Liberty mean to you?
- Why does Lazarus contrast the Colossus of Rhodes with "a mighty woman with a torch"?
- How do you react to Lazarus's description of "huddled masses" and "wretched refuse"?
- What would your faith tradition's view be of the poem and the theme of immigration?
- How does your family's immigration story influence your interpretation of the poem?
- Can you think of any sacred texts off the top of your head that support those views?

HISTORY

Immigration has long sparked controversy in America. While 19th century Americans welcomed those who, like them, were Northern European farmers or artisans, they opposed admitting impoverished Southern Europeans, like Italians, and equally impoverished Eastern European Jews. This xenophobic period also saw the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, the end of Reconstruction, the rise of Jim Crow and the Ku Klux Klan, and the persecution of Native Americans across the continent.

Written in 1883, Emma Lazarus's poem "*The New Colossus*", about the Statue of Liberty, boldly asserts that America will reject the model of ancient empires and instead define itself by compassion and inclusion. Lazarus envisions a nation that welcomes even the poorest newcomers, famously proclaiming, "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." His vision stands in sharp contrast to the **Colossus of Rhodes**, the ancient bronze statue of the sun god Helios built around 280 BCE. Towering over 100 feet tall which was erected to celebrate military victory, independence after a siege, strength, dominance, pride, and defense against enemies.

The message of *The New Colossus*; however was not what the French builders of the Statue of Liberty intended. Rather, they saw it as a celebration of the Union victory in the Civil War and gave it to America to mark a common commitment to individual liberty.

Lazarus thus, with a mere 14 lines of poetry, subverts the original intent of the Statue of Liberty. Her words transform this massive civic project into a symbol of open-armed welcome to immigrants arriving from across the Atlantic.