

Twelve River RIPPLES

Favourite Poem



Richard Whiting has sent us a short but very moving poem that still has a strong resonance in the world today.

The Jew

by Isaac Rosenberg

Moses, from whose loins I sprung,
Lit by a lamp in his blood
Ten immutable rules, a moon
For mutable lampless men.

The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy,
With the same heaving blood,
Keep tide to the moon of Moses,
Then why do they sneer at me?

Favourite Poem cont.

Isaac Rosenberg was born on 25 November 1890 in Bristol, the second of six children born to Jewish Lithuanian immigrants.

He was brought up in Stepney, East London, in an area of great poverty. A highly talented artist and poet, his work found favour with various patrons allowing him to study at the Slade School of Fine Art.

Unlike many of the revered poets of the First World War, Rosenberg remained a Private Soldier throughout his army life. This precluded him from such relative luxuries as a dug-out, candles, paper or pens to compose either letters or poems. He used scraps of paper and whatever opportunities of light and privacy he could find. The quality of his poetic output is therefore truly remarkable.

Rosenberg began his army life in a Bantam Battalion (12th Suffolk Regiment, Bury St Edmunds) as he was too short for regular army regiments. From here he wrote to patron of the arts Sydney Schiff soon after enlistment in November 1915:

... Besides my being a Jew makes it bad amongst these wretches

'The Jew' may well originate from this time, or perhaps, be an amalgam of anti-Semitic experience forged throughout his army and civilian life.

The first of the two four-line stanzas considers *Moses* a Jew chosen by God to receive the

Ten Immutable rules, (The Ten Commandments) who is the guide a moon for mutable lampless men.

The second stanza considers the diverse examples of *lampless men* – *The blonde, the bronze, the ruddy* observing that we all share *the same heaving blood* and obey the morality of these commandments *keep tide to the moon of Moses*. If we are all made of flesh and blood and following the same moral compass

Then why do they sneer at me?

Rosenberg has pointed out that his fellow soldiers follow a biblical code of ethics, given by a God, their God and his, yet his being a Jew is considered worthy of a *sneer* (which may well be euphemistic) and, in light of the war, aren't they fighting a common enemy?

We regard Isaac Rosenberg today as one of the greatest of First World War poets. Sadly, such masterpieces as 'Dead Man's Dump' or 'Returning, We Hear The Larks' still resonate loudly across contemporary battle fields. 'The Jew' would see its *sneer* grow rapidly into the mass-murder of the Holocaust just two decades after its composition.

Isaac Rosenberg remains an important and relevant poet. We still wage war and we still see religious intolerance on a daily basis. Is the tragedy in his words, or in the fact that his ink still appears to be so wet upon the page? The word *why* in the final line seems to be an ageless, unanswered question.

Richard Whiting