

Impressum

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: The True Religion (Mk 1.6)

Giovanni Boccaccio: The Story of the Rings

Length of both stories: 5,452 words = 29,993 characters

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Editorial introduction

In this story, which Gotthold Ephraim Lessing based on a story by Boccaccio, the narrator provides us with a foolproof method of determining which of the three Abrahamic religions is the true one. The proposed method is eminently useful because it abolishes the need for war or force or legislation to determine this and to induce people to pray to the true God. (1)

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: The True Religion

A conversation between Sultan Saladin, the Muslim, and Wise Nathan, the Jew	
	
Sultan Saladin (2) (Saladinus, by Cristofano dell'Altissimo, before 1568)	Wise Nathan (3) Ludwig Wüllner as Nathan in Lessing's "Nathan der Weise"

Die Ringparabel	The Parable of the Ring
<p>Saladin. Ich heische deinen Unterricht in ganz Was anderm; ganz was anderm. - Da du nun So weise bist: so sage mir doch einmal - Was für ein Glaube, was für ein Gesetz Hat dir am meisten eingeleuchtet?</p>	<p>Saladin: I request your teaching in something quite different. You are reputed to be wise: therefore please tell me which faith, which law, seemed most reasonable to you.</p>
<p>Nathan. Sultan, Ich bin ein Jud'.</p>	<p>Nathan: Sultan, I am a Jew...</p>
<p>Saladin. Und ich ein Muselmann. Der Christ ist zwischen uns. - Von diesen drei Religionen kann doch eine nur Die wahre sein. - Ein Mann, wie du, bleibt da Nicht stehen, wo der Zufall der Geburt Ihn hingeworfen: oder wenn er bleibt, Bleibt er aus Einsicht, Gründen, Wahl des Bessern.</p> <p>Wohlan! so teile deine Einsicht mir Dann mit. Laß mich die Gründe hören, denen Ich selber nachzugrübeln, nicht die Zeit Gehabt. Laß mich die Wahl, die diese Gründe Bestimmt, - versteht sich, im Vertrauen - wissen, Damit ich sie zu meiner mache.</p>	<p>Saladin: And I a Muslim. The Christian stands between us. - Of these three religions only one can be the true one. - I man like you will not remain where the accident of his birth has thrown him: or, if he remains there, he remains because of some insight, because of reasons, because he has chosen what is best.</p> <p>All right! Tell me your insights. Let me hear the reasons which for lack of time I have been unable to work out. Let me know the choice which has been determined by these reasons (in complete confidence, of course), so that I can make the same choice.</p>

<p>Wie? Du stutzezt? wägst mich mit dem Auge? - Kann Wohl sein, daß ich der erste Sultan bin, Der eine solche Grille hat; die mich Doch eines Sultans eben nicht so ganz Unwürdig dünkt. - Nicht wahr? - So rede doch! Sprich! - Oder willst du einen Augenblick, Dich zu bedenken? Gut, ich geb ihn dir.</p>	<p>What? You you are surprised? You are weighing me with your eyes? Perhaps I am the first Sultan who has such a whim; but it is a whim not completely unworthy of a Sultan. You agree? All right, speak then! Say something. Or do you want a moment to think about it? All right, I will give you that time.</p>
<p>(Ob sie wohl horcht? Ich will sie doch belauschen; Will hören, ob ich's recht gemacht. -)</p>	<p>Whispers: (I wonder if she is listening? I must find out; I must find out whether I have set the trap as she wanted me to.)</p>
<p>Denk nach. Geschwind denk nach! Ich säume nicht, zurück-Zukommen. (Er geht in das Nebenzimmer, nach welchem sich Sittah begeben.)</p>	<p>Think about it. Make it snappy. I will be back in a minute. (He goes into the adjoining room, to which Sittah has gone.)</p>
<p>Nathan allein.</p> <p>Hm! hm! - wunderlich! - Wie ist Mir denn? - Was will der Sultan? was? - Ich bin Auf Geld gefaßt; und er will - Wahrheit. Wahrheit! Und will sie so, - so bar, so blank, - als ob Die Wahrheit Münze wäre! -</p> <p>ja, wenn noch Uralte Münze, die gewogen ward! - Das ginge noch! Allein so neue Münze, Die nur der Stempel macht, die man aufs Brett Nur zählen darf, das ist sie doch nun nicht! Wie Geld in Sack, so striche man in Kopf Auch Wahrheit ein? Wer ist denn hier der Jude? Ich oder er? -</p> <p>Doch wie? Sollt' er auch wohl Die Wahrheit nicht in Wahrheit fodern? - Zwar, Zwar der Verdacht, daß er die Wahrheit nur Als Falle brauche, wär' auch gar zu klein! -</p> <p>Zu klein? - Was ist für einen Großen denn Zu klein? - Gewiß, gewiß: er stürzte mit Der Türe so ins Haus! Man pocht doch, hört Doch erst, wenn man als Freund sich naht. -</p> <p>Ich muß Behutsam gehn! - Und wie? wie das? - So ganz Stockjude sein zu wollen, geht schon nicht. - Und ganz und gar nicht Jude, geht noch minder. Denn, wenn kein Jude, dürft' er mich nur fragen, Warum kein Muselman? -</p>	<p>Nathan alone:</p> <p>Hm, hm! strange! I feel funny. What does the Sultan want? What? I am expecting a demand for money, but he demands truth. Truth! And he wants it in such a simple form, so plain, as if truth were a gold coin!</p> <p>Well, if at least he were asking for the old type of coin which has to be weighed. I could let that pass. But he wants it like one of those new-fangled coins, which derive their value only by the impression made on it, which one only has to count on the table. Truth is not like that! One cannot put truth into a head as one can put money into a bag. In this setup, who is the Jew, I or he?</p> <p>But wait! Could it be that he is not in truth demanding truth? Of course, the suspicion that he is using truth only as a trap is too demeaning.</p> <p>Too demeaning? Is anything too demeaning for a powerful man? Sure, sure: he practically kicked the door open! Normally one would knock gently and listen if one comes as a friend.</p> <p>I have to proceed warily. And how? To be an inflexible Jew will not do. And not to be a Jew at all is even worse. For, if not a Jew, then he only has to ask, why not a Muslim.</p>

<p>Das war's! Das kann Mich retten! - Nicht die Kinder bloß, speist man Mit Märchen ab. -</p> <p>Er kommt. Er komme nur!</p>	<p>Ah, I have an idea. This will save me. It is not only children whom one can satisfy with fairy tales.</p> <p>He comes. Let him come.</p>
<p>Saladin. (So ist das Feld hier rein!) - Ich komm dir doch Nicht zu geschwind zurück? Du bist zu Rande Mit deiner Überlegung. - Nun so rede! Es hört uns keine Seele.</p>	<p>Saladin: (Nobody is spying on us.) I hope I have not returned too quickly. Have you finished your considerations? Well, talk then. Nobody is spying on us.</p>
<p>Nathan. Möcht' auch doch Die ganze Welt uns hören.</p>	<p>Nathan: I wished the whole world were listening.</p>
<p>Saladin. So gewiß Ist Nathan seiner Sache? Ha! das nenn Ich einen Weisen! Nie die Wahrheit zu Verhehlen! für sie alles auf das Spiel Zu setzen! Leib und Leben! Gut und Blut!</p>	<p>Saladin: Nathan is so sure of his case? Well, that is truly a wise man! Never to hide the truth. To risk everything for it! Body and life! Property and blood!</p>
<p>Nathan. Ja! Ja! wann's nötig ist und nutzt.</p>	<p>Nathan: Yes! Yes! If it is necessary and if it is useful.</p>
<p>Saladin. Von nun An darf ich hoffen, einen meiner Titel, Verbesserer der Welt und des Gesetzes, Mit Recht zu führen.</p>	<p>Saladin: From now on I may hope to merit one of my titles 'Improver of the world and of the law'.</p>
<p>Nathan. Traun, ein schöner Titel! Doch, Sultan, eh' ich mich dir ganz vertraue, Erlaubst du wohl, dir ein Geschichtchen zu Erzählen?</p>	<p>Nathan: A beautiful title indeed. But, Sultan, before I give you my full confidence, would you permit me to tell you a little story?</p>
<p>Saladin. Warum das nicht? Ich bin stets Ein Freund gewesen von Geschichtchen, gut Erzählt.</p>	<p>Saladin: Why not? I have always been a friend of little stories, provided they were well told.</p>
<p>Nathan. Ja, gut erzählen, das ist nun Wohl eben meine Sache nicht.</p>	<p>Nathan: Well, to tell stories well, that is not really my strong point.</p>
<p>Saladin. Schon wieder So stolz bescheiden? - Mach! erzähl, erzähle!</p>	<p>Saladin: Again so proudly humble? Get on with it! Tell the story, tell it.</p>

<p>Nathan. Vor grauen Jahren lebt' ein Mann in Osten, Der einen Ring von unschätzbarem Wert Aus lieber Hand besaß. Der Stein war ein Opal, der hundert schöne Farben spielte, Und hatte die geheime Kraft, vor Gott Und Menschen angenehm zu machen, wer In dieser Zuversicht ihn trug.</p>	<p>Nathan: In ancient time a man lived in the East who owned a ring of inestimable value which a beloved woman had given him.</p> <p>The stone was an opal, which radiated a hundred beautiful colours and had the mysterious power to make beloved of God and man the person who wore it trusting in this power.</p>
<p>Was Wunder, Daß ihn der Mann in Osten darum nie Vom Finger ließ; und die Verfügung traf, Auf ewig ihn bei seinem Hause zu Erhalten? Nämlich so.</p>	<p>No wonder that the man in the East never took it off his finger and made arrangements to keep it for ever in his family? Like this.</p>
<p>Er ließ den Ring Von seinen Söhnen dem geliebtesten; Und setzte fest, daß dieser wiederum Den Ring von seinen Söhnen dem vermache, Der ihm der liebste sei; und stets der liebste, Ohn' Ansehn der Geburt, in Kraft allein Des Rings, das Haupt, der Fürst des Hauses werde. -</p>	<p>He left the ring to that of his sons whom he loved most and ordered that this son in turn had to leave the ring to that of his sons who was dearest to him; and that always the dearest son, regardless whether he was first-born, should, merely through the power of the ring, become the head, the prince, of the dynasty.</p>
<p>So kam nun dieser Ring, von Sohn zu Sohn, Auf einen Vater endlich von drei Söhnen; Die alle drei ihm gleich gehorsam waren, Die alle drei er folglich gleich zu lieben Sich nicht entbrechen konnte.</p> <p>Nur von Zeit Zu Zeit schien ihm bald der, bald dieser, bald Der dritte, - sowie jeder sich mit ihm Allein befand, und sein ergießend Herz Die andern zwei nicht teilten, - würdiger Des Ringes;</p> <p>den er denn auch einem jeden Die fromme Schwachheit hatte, zu versprechen.</p>	<p>So this ring passed from son to son, and in the end passed to a father of three sons, all of whom were equally obedient to him and whom he therefore could not help loving equally.</p> <p>Only from time to time sometimes one son, sometimes another, sometimes the third, appeared to him worthier of the ring - depending on which of them was alone with him so that he did not have to share out the love that flowed out of his heart.</p> <p>Therefore he had the sweet weakness to promise the ring to each of them.</p>
<p>Das ging nun so, solange es ging. - Allein Es kam zum Sterben, und der gute Vater Kömmt in Verlegenheit. Es schmerzt ihn, zwei Von seinen Söhnen, die sich auf sein Wort Verlassen, so zu kränken. - Was zu tun? -</p>	<p>That continued for a while. But the hour of his death approached, and the good father was on the spot. He could not hurt two of his sons who had relied on his promise. What was he to do?</p>
<p>Er sendet in geheim zu einem Künstler, Bei dem er, nach dem Muster seines Ringes, Zwei andere bestellt, und weder Kosten</p>	<p>He secretly calls a goldsmith and asks him to make two copies of the ring, and not to spare effort or expense to make them exactly the same.</p>

<p>Noch Mühe sparen heißt, sie jenem gleich, Vollkommen gleich zu machen.</p>	
<p>Das gelingt Dem Künstler. Da er ihm die Ringe bringt, Kann selbst der Vater seinen Musterring Nicht unterscheiden. Froh und freudig ruft Er seine Söhne, jeden insbesondere; Gibt jedem insbesondere seinen Segen, - Und seinen Ring, - und stirbt. - Du hörst doch, Sultan?</p>	<p>The goldsmith succeeds. When he brings the rings even the father can not longer pick out the original from the copies. Full of joy he calls his three sons, each of them on his own, gives each of them his blessing and his ring, - and dies. - Are you listening, Sultan?</p>
<p>Saladin (der sich betroffen von ihm gewandt). Ich hör, ich höre! - Komm mit deinem Märchen Nur bald zu Ende. - Wird's?</p>	<p>Saladan (who has turned away in consternation). I am listening. Finish your story. Make it snappy.</p>
<p>Nathan. Ich bin zu Ende. Denn was noch folgt, versteht sich ja von selbst. - Kaum war der Vater tot, so kömmt ein jeder Mit seinem Ring, und jeder will der Fürst Des Hauses sein. Man untersucht, man zankt, Man klagt. Umsonst; der rechte Ring war nicht Erweislich; - (nach einer Pause, in welcher er des Sultans Antwort erwartet) Fast so unerweislich, als Uns itzt - der rechte Glaube.</p>	<p>Nathan: I HAVE finished. For the rest is obvious. The moment the father was dead, each son comes with his ring and wants to be the prince of the dynasty. One investigates, one quarrels, one goes to court. In vain, it was impossible to prove which was the genuine ring; (after a pause, during which he is waiting for the Sultan's anwer) almost as impossible to prove as now for us the true faith.</p>
<p>Saladin. Wie? das soll Die Antwort sein auf meine Frage? ...</p>	<p>Saladin: What? Is that meant to be the answer to my question?</p>
<p>Nathan. Soll Mich bloß entschuldigen, wenn ich die Ringe Mir nicht getrau zu unterscheiden, die Der Vater in der Absicht machen ließ, Damit sie nicht zu unterscheiden wären.</p>	<p>Nathan: It is merely meant to excuse the fact that I do not dare to distinguish between the rings which the father had made with the intention that they should be indistinguishable.</p>
<p>Saladin. Die Ringe! - Spiele nicht mit mir! - Ich dächte, Daß die Religionen, die ich dir Genannt, doch wohl zu unterscheiden wären. Bis auf die Kleidung, bis auf Speis' und Trank!</p>	<p>Saladin: That applies only to the rings. Do not play games with me! I should have thought that the religions which I have named could easily be distinguished, right down to dress, to food and drink!</p>
<p>Nathan. Und nur von seiten ihrer Gründe nicht. Denn gründen alle sich nicht auf Geschichte? Geschrieben oder überliefert! - Und Geschichte muß doch wohl allein auf Treu Und Glauben angenommen werden? - Nicht? - Nun, wessen Treu und Glauben zieht man denn</p>	<p>Nathan: But not in respect of their foundations (reasons). Are they not all founded on history? Written or handed down by word of mouth! And history has to be accepted on trust, doesn't it. And whom does one believe most? Of course one's own parents, who from childhood onwards have demonstrated their love to us; who have</p>

<p>Am wenigsten in Zweifel? Doch der Seinen? Doch deren Blut wir sind? doch deren, die Von Kindheit an uns Proben ihrer Liebe Gegeben? die uns nie getäuscht, als wo Getäuscht zu werden uns heilsamer war? -</p>	<p>never deceived us except in situations where it was more beneficial to us to be deceived.</p>
<p>Wie kann ich meinen Vätern weniger Als du den deinen glauben? Oder umgekehrt. - Kann ich von dir verlangen, daß du deine Vorfahren Lügen strafst, um meinen nicht Zu widersprechen? Oder umgekehrt. Das nämliche gilt von den Christen. Nicht? -</p>	<p>How can I believe my ancestors less than you believe yours? Or the other way round. Can I demand that you call your ancestors liars in order to say nothing against mine? Or vice versa. The same applies to the Christians, doesn't it?</p>
<p>Saladin. (Bei dem Lebendigen! Der Mann hat recht. Ich muß verstummen.)</p>	<p>Saladin: (By the living God! The man is right. There is nothing I can say.)</p>
<p>Nathan. Laß auf unsre Ring' Uns wieder kommen. Wie gesagt: die Söhne Verklagten sich; und jeder schwur dem Richter, Unmittelbar aus seines Vaters Hand Den Ring zu haben. - Wie auch wahr! - Nachdem Er von ihm lange das Versprechen schon Gehabt, des Ringes Vorrecht einmal zu Genießen. - Wie nicht minder wahr! -</p> <p>Der Vater, Beteurt' jeder, könne gegen ihn Nicht falsch gewesen sein; und eh' er dieses Von ihm, von einem solchen lieben Vater, Argwohnen lass': eh' müß' er seine Brüder, So gern er sonst von ihnen nur das Beste Bereit zu glauben sei, des falschen Spiels Bezeihen; und er wolle die Verräter Schon auszufinden wissen; sich schon rächen.</p>	<p>Nathan: Let us return to our rings. As I said, the sons took each other to court, and each swore an oath that he had received the ring directly from his father's hand. Which was true! And after having received several years back the promise that he would one day have the privilege of the ring. Which was just as true.</p> <p>Each of them argued that the father could not have deceived him; and rather than suspect such a dear father of such trick: he would have to accuse his brothers of dishonesty, even though normally he would only expect good actions from them. But he would eventually find the traitors and take revenge.</p>
<p>Saladin. Und nun, der Richter? - Mich verlangt zu hören, Was du den Richter sagen lässest. Sprich!</p>	<p>Saladin: And now, the judge? I want to hear what you let the judge say. Speak.</p>
<p>Nathan. Der Richter sprach: Wenn ihr mir nun den Vater Nicht bald zur Stelle schafft, so weis ich euch Von meinem Stuhle. Denkt ihr, daß ich Rätsel Zu lösen da bin? Oder harret ihr, Bis daß der rechte Ring den Mund eröffne? -</p> <p>Doch halt! Ich höre ja, der rechte Ring Besitzt die Wunderkraft beliebt zu machen; Vor Gott und Menschen angenehm. Das muß Entscheiden! Denn die falschen Ringe werden Doch das nicht können! - Nun; wen lieben zwei Von Euch am meisten? - Macht, sagt an! Ihr</p>	<p>Nathan: The judge said: If you do not produce the father right now, I will throw you out of this court. Do you think it is my job to solve riddles? Or are you waiting for the right ring to speak up?</p> <p>But wait! You told me that the right ring has the miraculous power to make the bearer beloved of God and man. That will decide the issue! For the false rings will not be able to do that! All right: which of you is most loved by the two others? Come on, speak up! You are silent?</p>

<p>schweigt? Die Ringe wirken nur zurück? und nicht Nach außen? Jeder liebt sich selber nur Am meisten? -</p> <p>Oh, so seid ihr alle drei Betrogene Betrüger! Eure Ringe Sind alle drei nicht echt. Der echte Ring Vermutlich ging verloren. Den Verlust Zu bergen, zu ersetzen, ließ der Vater Die drei für einen machen.</p>	<p>The rings only work on the bearer, and not on the outside world? Each of you loves only himself most.</p> <p>Ah, then the three of you are tricked tricksters. None of the rings is genuine. The genuine ring presumably was lost. To cover up the loss, the father had three rings made in place of the one.</p>
<p>Saladin. Herrlich! herrlich!</p>	<p>Saladin: Fantastic, fantastic!</p>
<p>Nathan. Und also, fuhr der Richter fort, wenn ihr Nicht meinen Rat, statt meines Spruches, wollt: Geht nur! -</p> <p>Mein Rat ist aber der: ihr nehmt Die Sache völlig wie sie liegt. Hat von Euch jeder seinen Ring von seinem Vater: So glaube jeder sicher seinen Ring Den echten. -</p> <p>Möglich; daß der Vater nun Die Tyrannei des einen Rings nicht länger In seinem Hause dulden willen! - Und gewiß; Daß er euch alle drei geliebt, und gleich Geliebt: indem er zwei nicht drücken mögen, Um einen zu begünstigen. -</p> <p>Wohlan! Es eifre jeder seiner unbestochnen Von Vorurteilen freien Liebe nach! Es strebe von euch jeder um die Wette, Die Kraft des Steins in seinem Ring' an Tag Zu legen! komme dieser Kraft mit Sanftmut, Mit herzlicher Verträglichkeit, mit Wohltun, Mit innigster Ergebenheit in Gott Zu Hilf'!</p> <p>Und wenn sich dann der Steine Kräfte Bei euern Kindes-Kindeskindern äußern: So lad ich über tausend tausend Jahre Sie wiederum vor diesen Stuhl. Da wird Ein weiser Mann auf diesem Stuhle sitzen Als ich; und sprechen. Geht! - So sagte der Bescheidne Richter.</p>	<p>Nathan: And therefore, continued the judge, if you do not want to take my advice instead of a decision, go away.</p> <p>But my advice is this: take the matter exactly as you find it. If each of you has the ring from his father: each of you should firmly believe that it ring is genuine.</p> <p>Perhaps the father did not want to tolerate the tyranny of the ring any longer in his house. And certainly he loved the three of you and he loved you equally: so he did not want to oppress two of you in order to favour one of you.</p> <p>Well, let each of you give free reign to his love, free of prejudice! Let each of you compete with the others to prove the power of the ring and make it evident. Support this power with gentleness, profound peacefulness, with charitable acts and compassion, and with profound love of God.</p> <p>And then, when the powers of the gems become apparent in the children of your children's children, then, after many thousand years, I will call you back to this court. Then a man, wiser than me, will sit on this chair, and will make the judgement. Go! So said the modest judge.</p>
<p>Saladin. Gott! Gott!</p>	<p>Saladin: Allah! Allah!</p>
<p>Nathan. Saladin,</p>	<p>Nathan: Saladin, if you think you are this</p>

<p>Wenn du dich fühlst, dieser weisere Versprochne Mann zu sein: ...</p>	<p>promised wiser man: ...</p>
<p>Saladin (der auf ihn zustürzt und seine Hand ergreift, die er bis zu Ende nicht wieder fahren läßt). Ich Staub? Ich Nichts? O Gott!</p>	<p>Saladin (runs towards Nathan, grasps his hand, and does not let go of it until the end of this scene): I who am dust? I who am nothing? Allah!</p>
<p>Nathan. Was ist dir, Sultan?</p>	<p>Nathan: What is wrong, Sultan?</p>
<p>Saladin. Nathan, lieber Nathan! - Die tausend tausend Jahre deines Richters Sind noch nicht um. - Sein Richterstuhl ist nicht Der meine. - Geh! - Geh! - Aber sei mein Freund.</p>	<p>Saladin: Nathan, dear Nathan! The many thousand years of your judge have not yet passed. His court is not mine. Go. Go. But be my friend.</p>
<p>Nathan. Und weiter hätte Saladin mir nichts Zu sagen?</p>	<p>Nathan: And there is nothing else that Saladin wants to say to me?</p>
<p>Saladin. Nichts.</p>	<p>Saladin: Nothing.</p>
<p>Nathan. Nichts?</p>	<p>Nathan: Nothing?</p>
<p>Saladin. Gar nichts. - Und warum?</p>	<p>Saladin: Nothing at all. Why are you asking?</p>
<p>Nathan. Ich hätte noch Gelegenheit gewünscht, Dir eine Bitte vorzutragen.</p>	<p>Nathan: I would have liked the opportunity to make a request.</p>
<p>Saladin. Braucht's Gelegenheit zu einer Bitte? - Rede!</p>	<p>Saladin: Does one need an opportunity to make a request? Speak.</p>
<p>Nathan. Ich komm von einer weiten Reis', auf welcher Ich Schulden eingetrieben. - Fast hab ich Des baren Gelds zuviel. - Die Zeit beginnt Bedenklich wiederum zu werden; - und Ich weiß nicht recht, wo sicher damit hin. - Da dacht' ich, ob nicht du vielleicht, - weil doch Ein naher Krieg des Geldes immer mehr Erfordert, - etwas brauchen könntest.</p>	<p>Nathan: I have just returned from a long trip during which I have collected outstanding debts. I almost have too much cash on my hands. Times are becoming risky again, and I do not know where I can safely invest it. So I thought whether could you use it, since an approaching war always demands more money.</p>

^Giovanni Boccaccio: The Story of the Rings

Lessing's story is based on one by Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), in Boccaccio's "Decameron", Day 1:Tale 3, "faithfully translated by J M Rigg". The story is told by Filomena.

Read from top to bottom in Column 1 over several pages, then continue at the top of Column 2.

**Melchisedech, a Jew,
by a story of three rings
averts a great danger
with which he was menaced by Saladin.**



Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375)

When Neifile had brought her story to a close amid the commendations of all the company, Filomena, at the queen's behest, thus began:

The story told by Neifile brings to my mind another in which also a Jew appears, but this time as the hero of a perilous adventure; and as enough has been said of God and of the truth our faith, it will not now be inopportune if we descend to mundane events and the actions of men. Wherefore I propose to tell you a story, which will perhaps dispose you to be more circumspect than you have been wont to be in answering questions addressed to you.

Well ye know, or should know, loving gossips, that, as it often happens that folk by their own folly forfeit a happy estate and are plunged in most grievous misery, so good sense will extricate the wise from extremity of peril, and establish them in complete and assured peace.

"My lord, a pretty question indeed is this which you propound, and fain would I answer it; to which end it is apposite that I tell you a story, which, if you will hearken, is as follows:-

If I mistake not, I remember to have often heard tell of a great and rich man of old time, who among other most precious jewels had in his treasury a ring of extraordinary beauty and value, which by reason of its value and beauty he was minded to leave to his heirs for ever;

for which cause he ordained, that, whichever of his sons was found in possession of the ring as by his bequest, should thereby be designate his heir, and be entitled to receive from the rest the honour and homage due to a superior.

The son, to whom he bequeathed the ring, left it in like manner to his descendants, making the like ordinance as his predecessor.

<p>Of the change from good to evil fortune, which folly may effect, instances abound; indeed, occurring as they do by the thousand day by day, they are so conspicuous that their recital would be beside our present purpose. But that good sense may be our succour in misfortune, I will now, as I promised, make plain to you within the narrow compass of a little story.</p>	<p>In short the ring passed from hand to hand for many generations; and in the end came to the hands of one who had three sons, goodly and virtuous all, and very obedient to their father, so that he loved them all indifferently.</p>
<p>***</p>	<p>The rule touching the descent of the ring was known to the young men, and each aspiring to hold the place of honour among them did all he could to persuade his father, who was now old, to leave the ring to him at his death.</p>
<p>Saladin, who by his great valour had from small beginnings made himself Soldan of Egypt, and gained many victories over kings both Christian and Saracen, having in divers wars and by divers lavish displays of magnificence spent all his treasure, and in order to meet a certain emergency being in need of a large sum of money, and being at a loss to raise it with a celerity adequate to his necessity, bethought him of a wealthy Jew, Melchisedech by name, who lent at usance in Alexandria, and who, were he but willing, was, as he believed, able to accommodate him, but was so miserly that he would never do so of his own accord, nor was Saladin disposed to constrain him thereto.</p>	<p>The worthy man, who loved them all equally, and knew not how to choose from among them a sole legatee, promised the ring to each in turn, and in order to satisfy all three, caused a cunning artificer secretly to make two other rings, so like the first, that the maker himself could hardly tell which was the true ring.</p>
<p>So great, however, was his necessity that, after pondering every method whereby the Jew might be induced to be compliant, at last he determined to devise a colourably reasonable pretext for extorting the money from him.</p>	<p>So, before he died, he disposed of the rings, giving one privily to each of his sons; whereby it came to pass, that after his decease each of the sons claimed the inheritance and the place of honour, and, his claim being disputed by his brothers, produced his ring in witness of right.</p>
<p>So he sent for him, received him affably, seated him by his side, and presently said to him:-</p>	<p>And the rings being found so like one to another that it was impossible to distinguish the true one, the suit to determine the true heir remained pendent, and still so remains.</p>
<p>***</p>	<p>And so, my lord, to your question, touching the three laws given to the three peoples by God the Father, I answer:-</p>
<p>"My good man, I have heard from many people that thou art very wise, and of great discernment in divine things;</p>	<p>***</p>
<p>wherefore I would gladly know of thee, which of the three laws thou reputest the true law, the law of the Jews, the law of the Saracens, or the law of the Christians?"</p>	<p>Each of these peoples deems itself to have the true inheritance, the true law, the true commandments of God; but which of them is justified in so believing, is a question which, like that of the rings, remains pendent."</p> <p>The excellent adroitness with which the Jew had contrived to evade the snare which he had laid for his feet was not lost upon Saladin.</p>



<p>***</p> <p>The Jew, who was indeed a wise man, saw plainly enough that Saladin meant to entangle him in his speech, that he might have occasion to harass him, and bethought him that he could not praise any of the three laws above another without furnishing Saladin with the pretext which he sought.</p> <p>So, concentrating all the force of his mind to shape such an answer as might avoid the snare, he presently lit on what he sought, saying:</p> <p>***</p> <p>Continue at the top of Column 2</p>	<p>He therefore determined to let the Jew know his need, and did so, telling him at the same time what he had intended to do, in the event of his answering less circumspectly than he had done.</p> <p>Thereupon the Jew gave the Soldan all the accommodation that he required, which the Soldan afterwards repaid him in full.</p> <p>He also gave him most munificent gifts with his lifelong amity and a great and honourable position near his person.</p>
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^Endnotes

- (01) Lessing wrote his play "Nathan der Weise" (Wise Nathan) in 1779. An verse translation of the whole play by William Taylor is available online and in print. The German original is written in blank verse (Shakespeare). English prose translation by Klaus Bung

- (02) The historical Saladin (1137-1193), who is one of the protagonists in this fictitious story, lived at the time of the Third Crusade (1189-1192). He conquered Jerusalem in 1187. He was of Kurdish descent. In Lessing's play he has summoned a rich Jewish merchant, known as "Wise Nathan" for an interview. The interview occurs in Lessing's "Nathan der Weise", Act 3, Scene 7.

- (03) In developing the character of Nathan, Lessing was inspired by his close friendship with Jewish philosopher and theologian Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), who lived in Berlin and in his writings tried to modernise Judaism and make it compatible with the insights of rationalism and modern science.

	
Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)	Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786)

The friendship of Lessing and Mendelssohn is a real-life example of the beauty of friendship of people of different cultures and different religions and the irrelevance of "race" (as demonstrated by German-American anthropologist **Franz Boas**, 1858-1942), which is the subject of so many other texts in this collection.

- (04) Ludwig Wüllner (1858-1938) as Nathan in Lessing's "Nathan der Weise"
 Source: <https://thue.museum-digital.de/object/1237?navlang=de>