

Nathan the Wise – Which One is the True Religion?

In 1778 G.E. Lessing wrote "Nathan the Wise," a parable about religious tolerance. It is set in Jerusalem during the Third Crusade, when all of Muslim Palestine was under attack by Christian forces from Europe.

Saladin – the Muslim - decides to test Nathan 'the Wise' by asking which of the three religions -- Christianity, Judaism, or Islam -- is the one true religion:

SALADIN: . . . Of these three
Religions, only one can be the true one.--
A man like you does not remain where chance
Of birth has cast him: if he so remains,
It's out of insight, reasons, better choice.
Well, then! such insight I would share with you.
Let me the reasons know, which I have had
No time to ponder out. Reveal to me
The choice determined by these reasons plain--
Of course in confidence--that I as well
May make your choice my own.

. . .

NATHAN: In days of yore, there dwelt in eastern lands
A man who had a ring of priceless worth
Received from hands beloved. The stone it held,
An opal, shed a hundred colors fair,
And had the magic power that he who wore it,
Trusting its strength, was loved of God and men.
No wonder therefore that this eastern man
Would never cease to wear it; and took pains
To keep in it in his household for all time.
He left the ring to that one of his sons
He loved the best; providing that in turn
That son bequeath to his most favorite son
The ring; and thus, regardless of his birth,
The dearest son, by virtue of the ring,
Should be the head, the prince of all his house.--
You follow, Sultan.

SALADIN:
Perfectly. Continue!

NATHAN: At last this ring, passed on from son to son,
Descended to a father of three sons;
All three of whom were duly dutiful,
All three of whom in consequence he needs
Must love alike. But yet from time to time,
Now this, now that one, now the third -- as each
Might be with him alone, the other two
Not sharing then his overflowing heart--
Seemed worthiest of the ring; and so to each
He promised it, in pious frailty.
This lasted while it might. -- Then came the time
For dying, and the loving father finds
Himself embarrassed. It's a grief to him
To wound two of his sons, who have relied

Upon his word. -- What's to be done? -- He sends
In secret to a jeweler, of whom
He orders two more rings, in pattern like
His own, and bids him spare nor cost nor toil
To make them in all points identical.
The jeweler succeeds. And when the rings

Are brought to him, the sire himself cannot
Distinguish them from the original.
In glee and joy he calls his sons to him,
Each by himself, confers on him his blessing --
His ring as well -- and dies. -- You listen, Sultan?

SALADIN:
I hear,
I hear you! -- Finish now your fable
Without delay. -- I'm waiting!

NATHAN:
I am done.
What happens then you can predict --
Scarce is the father dead when all three sons
Appear, each with his ring, and each would be
The reigning prince. They seek the facts, they quarrel,
Accuse. In vain; the genuine ring was not
Demonstrable; --
(He pauses for a reply)

almost as little as
Today the genuine faith.

SALADIN:
You mean this as
the answer to my question?

NATHAN:
What I mean
Is merely an excuse, if I decline
Precisely to distinguish those three rings

Which with intent the father ordered made
That sharpest eyes might not distinguish them.

SALADIN: The rings! -- Don't joke with me! -- I should think
That those religions which I named to you
Might be distinguished readily enough.
Down to their clothing; down to food and drink!

NATHAN: In all respects except their basic grounds. --
Are they not grounded all in history,
Or writ or handed down? But history
Must be accepted wholly upon faith--
Not so? -- Well then, whose faith are we least like
To doubt? Our people's surely? Those whose blood
We share? the ones who from our childhood gave

Us proofs of love? who never duped us, but
When it was for our good to be deceived?--
How can I trust my fathers less than you
Trust yours? Or vice versa, can I demand
That your tradition you should spurn
That mine be not rejected? Or turn about again:
The same holds true of Christians. Am I right?--

SALADIN:

(aside)

By Allah, yes! The man is right. I must
Be still.

NATHAN:

Let's come back to our rings once more.
As we have said: the sons each go to court;
And each swore to the judge, he had received
The ring directly from his father's hand. --
As was the truth! -- And long before had had
His father's promise, one day to enjoy
The privilege of the ring. -- No less than truth! --
His father, each asserted, could not have
Been false to him; not such a loving father:
He must accuse his brothers -- howsoever
Inclined in other things to think the best
Of them -- of some false play; and he the traitors
Would promptly ferret out; would take revenge.
SALADIN: So what about the judge? I am all ears to hear
What you will have the judge decide. Speak on!

NATHAN: Thus said the judge: unless you swiftly bring
Your father here to me, I order you
To leave my court. Think you that I am here
For solving riddles? Would you wait, perhaps,
Until the genuine ring should rise and speak? --
But stop! I hear the genuine ring enjoys
The magic power to make its wearer loved,
Beloved of God and men. That will decide!
For spurious rings could surely not do that! --
Who is most loved by the other two? Speak up!
You're mute? The rings' effect is only backward,
Not outward? Each one loves himself the most?
O then you are, all three, deceived deceivers!
Your rings are false, all three. The genuine ring
No doubt got lost. To hide the grievous loss,
To make it good, the father caused three rings

To serve for one.

SALADIN:

O splendid, splendid!

NATHAN:

So,

The judge went on, if you'll not have my counsel,

Instead of verdict, go! My counsel is:
Accept the matter wholly as it stands.
If each one from his father has his ring,
Then let each one believe his ring to be
The true. -- Perhaps the father wished
To tolerate no longer in his house
The tyranny of just one ring! -- And know:
That you, all three, he loved; and loved alike;
Since two of you he'd not humiliate
To favor one. -- Well then! Let each aspire
To emulate his father's unbeguiled,
Unprejudiced affection! Let each strive
To match the rest in bringing to the fore
The magic of the opal in his ring!
Assist that power with all humility,
With benefaction, hearty peacefulness,
And with profound submission to God's will!
And when the magic powers of the stones
Reveal themselves in children's children's children:
I bid you, in a thousand thousand years,
To stand again before this seat. For then
A wiser man than I will sit as judge
Upon this bench, and speak. Depart! So said
The modest judge.

trans. Bayard Quincy Morgan