

"Nathan the Wise"

Gotthold Ephriam Lessing (1721-1781) was one of the great literary figures of the German enlightenment (yes there was an enlightenment in Germany!). He was a dramatist and critic and was a member of an advanced Masonic Order--an order that survived over time until it was finally crushed by Hitler. His play, "Nathan the Wise" is one of the most eloquent pleas for religious tolerance ever written (IMHO).

"Nathan the Wise" is set in Jerusalem during the reign of Saladin, from 1187 to 1193. The three main characters are Nathan, a rich Jewish merchant of Jerusalem, the Sultan Saladin, and a young Knight Templar whose life has been spared by Saladin after his capture during the fourth Crusade. These three main characters represent the three great religions of the world - Jewish, Moslem and Christian. Further, with Nathan and Saladin we have a confrontation between a man of wisdom and toleration of the ages, and a man whose temporal powers could be limited only by his death.

In the story, Saladin needs money for more wars, and he is trying to trick the Jewish merchant, Nathan, out of his great wealth. He calls Nathan to him and demands that he tell which of the three great religions he considers the true one. If he names his own, he offends the Sultan; but if he names another, he denies his own. His response after due deliberation is the priceless story of three rings, the seeking of the difference between true and false religion.

This is my translation. Lessing was the first German dramatist to write in Shakespearean blank verse as opposed to the klunky Alexandrine of his day. The blank verse form comes across very well in the German original, but I was not able to recreate it in the English translation.

Tom Williams

The prologue of the story shows Saladin trying to set a trap for Nathan

SALADIN - Since so great your wisdom, I pray you tell me what belief, what law has most commended itself to you.

NATHAN - Sultan, I am a Jew.

SALADIN - And I a Moslem. Between us is the Christian. Now, only one of all these three religions can be true. A man like you does not stand where accident of birth has cast him. If such a man remains, it is from judgment, reason, choice of best. Tell me your judgment; let me hear the reasons I've no time to seek myself.

Saladin demands to know from Nathan which religion is the true one.

Nathan's answer is in the form of the Parable of the Rings:

NATHAN - In gray antiquity there lived a man in Eastern lands who had received a ring of priceless worth from a beloved hand. Its stone, an opal, flashed a hundred colors, and had the secret power of giving favor, in sight of God and man, to him who wore it in confidence of its power. No wonder then, this man in the East would never take the ring off his finger, and provided that it should be preserved in his house forever. Such was the case. Unto the best beloved among his sons he left the ring, enjoining that that son in turn bequeath it to the son whom he should love the most; and in this way, by virtue of the ring alone, without regard to birth, that son should be the head and prince of the house. You understand me, Sultan?

SALADIN - Yes; go on!

NATHAN - From son to son the ring descending, came to one, the father of three; all of whom were equally obedient; whom all three he therefore loved with equal love. And yet from time to time now this son, now that, and now the third, - as with each he found himself alone, the others not dividing his fond heart, appeared to him the worthiest of the ring; which then, with loving weakness, he would promise to each in turn. Thus it continued long. But after years the time came that he must die; and then the loving father was sore perplexed. It grieved him thus to wound two faithful sons who trusted in his word; but what to do? In secrecy he calls an artisan to him, and commands of him two other rings, in the pattern of his own; and bids him spare neither cost nor pains to make them like, precisely like to that. The artist's skill succeeds. He brings the rings, and even the father cannot tell his own. Relieved and joyful, he summons his sons, each individually and to each one he gives his blessing, and his ring - and dies. You listen, Sultan?

SALADIN - (who, somewhat perplexed, has turned away) - Yes; I hear, I hear. But bring your story to an end.

NATHAN - 'Tis ended; For what remains is obvious. The father was scarcely dead when each son brings forth his ring, and claims the headship of the house. Questioning ensues, strife, and appeal to law; but all in vain. The genuine ring was not to be distinguished; - (after a pause, in which he awaits the Sultan's answer) As undistinguishable as with us the true religion.

SALADIN That is your answer to me?

NATHAN - But my apology for not presuming to judge between the rings, which with design the father ordered should be indistinguishable.

SALADIN - The rings? You trifle with me. The religions I named to you are plain to be distinguished - even in the dress, even in the food and drink.

NATHAN - In all except the grounds on which they rest. Are they not all founded on history, traditional or written? History can be accepted only upon trust. Whom now are we the least inclined to doubt? Not our own people - our own blood; not those who from our childhood up have proved their love; never disappointed us, save when disappointment was wholesome to us? Shall my ancestors receive less faith from me, than yours from you? Reverse it; Can I ask you to deny your fathers, and transfer your father to mine? Or yet, again, is this not the same as for Christians?

SALADIN - (By heavens, the man is right! I've naught to answer.)

NATHAN - Return we to our rings. As I have said, the sons appealed to law, and such stain to rest upon the memory of so dear a father such stain to rest, he must against his brothers, though gladly he would nothing but the best believe of them, each took oath before the judge and swore that from his father's hand he had the ring, - as was indeed the truth; and had received his promise long before, that one day the ring, with all its privileges, should be his own, - and this was no less the truth. Each one maintained that the father could not have been false to him; and rather than allow such a stain to rest upon the memory of so dear a father must bring charge of treachery against his brothers; although he gladly would believe nothing but the best of them. Thus he would find the means to expose traitors and be revenged on them.

SALADIN - And now the judge? I long to hear what words you give the judge. Go on!

NATHAN - Thus spoke the judge: Produce your father at once before me, or else I will dismiss you from my tribunal. Do you think I am here to guess your riddles? Or would you rather wait until the genuine ring shall speak? - But hold! As I am told, a magic power resides in the true ring to make its wearer loved - pleasing to God and man. Let that decide. For in the false ring no such virtue can lie. Which one among you, then, do two love best? Speak! Are you silent? Do the rings work only backward, but not outward? Does each one love himself the best? Then cheated cheats are all of you! All three rings are false. The genuine ring was lost; and to conceal its loss, the father made three in place of one.

SALADIN - Oh, excellent!

NATHAN - Go, therefore, said the judge, unless in place of my judgment you'd have my council: Accept the case exactly as it stands. If each has his ring directly from his father, then let each believe his own to be the genuine ring. 'Tis possible your father would no longer subject his house to one ring's tyranny; and certain that he loved all three of you, and loved you equally, he would not humble two that one might be exalted. Let

each one aspire to his unbought, impartial love; let each with the others vie to bring to light the virtue of the stone within his ring; Let gentleness, a hearty love of peace, beneficence, and perfect trust in God, come to its help. Then if the jewel's power should be revealed among your children's children, I bid you in a thousand, thousand years to come again before this bar. A wiser man than I shall occupy this seat, and speak. Now go! - Thus the modest judge dismissed them.

SALADIN - God!

NATHAN - If therefore, Saladin, you feel yourself that promised, wiser man -

SALADIN - (rushing to him, and seizing his hand, which he holds to the end). I? Dust! - I? Naught! Oh God!

NATHAN - What moves you, Sultan?

SALADIN - Nathan, Nathan! Not ended are the thousand, thousand years your judge foretold; not mine to claim his seat. Go, go! - But be my friend.