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tifies the scoundrels as none other than the steward and the administrator of the Baron's own estate. Finally, the chivalrous traveller discloses his own identity.

2. At the Baron's behest, Lisette had solicited from the anonymous traveller's servant, Christophe, his master's identity. Although equally ignorant of his master's identity, Christophe was enticed by a promise of a bribe (the snuff box) and told Lisette that his master was a nobleman who had fled his native Holland after having killed an opponent in a duel.

3. The 1754 text reads: "What does that mean? You can certainly still marry me."

4. The 1754 text reads: "Be quiet, Fraulein. I will explain later what that means."

5. "Es gibt doch wohl auch Juden, die keine Juden sind." The 1754 text reads. "No the deuce! The Jews are generous people."

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GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

5. A Parable of Toleration (1779)

NATHAN: In days of yore a man lived in the East,
Who owned a ring of marvellous worth,
Given to him by a hand beloved.
The stone was opal, and shed a hundred lovely rays,
But chiefly it possessed the secret power
To make the owner loved of God and man
If he but wore it in this faith and confidence;
What wonder then that this man in the East
Ne'er from his finger took the ring.
And so arranged it should forever with his house remain,
Namely, thus: He bequeathed it to
The most beloved of his sons,
Firmly prescribing that he in turn
Should leave it to the dearest of his sons;
And always thus the dearest, without respect to birth,
Became the head and chieftain of the house
By virtue of the ring alone.
You understand me, Sultan?

SALADIN: I understand. Proceed.

NATHAN: The ring, descending from son to son,
Came to the father of three sons at last,
All three of whom obeyed him equally,
And all of whom he therefore loved alike.
From time to time indeed, now one seemed worthiest of the ring,
And now another, now the third,
Just as it happened one or other with him were alone,
And his o'erflowing heart was not divided with the other two;
And so to each one of the three he gave
The promise—in pious weakness alone—
He should possess this wondrous ring.

Source: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Nathan the Wise, trans. William Jacks (Glasgow, 1894), act 3, scene 7.
This then went on as long as it could;  
But then at last it came to dying,  
Which brings the father into sore perplexity.  
It pains him much to practise such deceit  
Upon two sons who rested so upon his word.  
What can be done? In secret  
He seeks out a skilful artist,  
And from him orders two other rings,  
Just to the pattern of his own.  
And urges him to spare neither pains nor gold,  
To make a perfect match.  
The artist so succeeded in his task,  
That, when he brought the jewels home,  
The father even failed to tell which was the pattern ring.  
Now, glad and joyous, he calls his sons—  
But separately of course—gives each  
A special blessing with his ring, and died,  
You hear me, Sultan?

Saladin: (Somewhat moved, turns from him)  
I hear, I hear;  
But pray get ended with your tale.  
You soon will be?

Nathan: I’m at the end,  
For what follows is self-understood.  
Scarce was the father dead,  
When each one with his ring appears  
Claiming each the leadership of the house.  
Inspections, quarrelling, and complaints ensue;  
But all in vain, the veritable ring  
Was not distinguishable—  
(After a pause, during which he expects the Sultan’s answer)  
Almost as indistinguishable as to us,  
Is now—the true religion

Saladin: What? Is that meant as answer to my question?

Nathan: This meant but to excuse myself, because  
I lack the boldness to discriminate between the rings,  
Which the father by express intent had made  
So that they might not be distinguished.

Saladin: The rings! Don’t play with me.  
I thought the faiths which I have named  
Were easily distinguishable.  
Even to their raiment, even to meat and drink.

Nathan: But not yet as regards their proofs;  
For do not all rest upon history, written or traditional?  
And history can also be accepted  
Only on faith and trust. Is it not so?  
Now, whose faith and confidence do we least misdoubt?  
That of our relatives? Of those who flesh and blood we are,  
Of those who from our childhood  
Have lavished on us proofs of love,
Who ne’er deceived us, unless ‘twere wholesome for us so?
How can I place less faith in my forefathers
Than in yours? or the reverse?
Can I desire of you to load your ancestors with lies,
So that you contradict not mine? Or the reverse?
And to the Christian the same applies.

**Saladin:** By the living God, the man is right, I must be dumb.

**Nathan:** Let us return unto our rings.
As said, the sons accused each other,
And each one swore before the judge
He had received his ring directly
From his father’s hand—which was quite true—
And that, indeed, after having long his promise held,
To enjoy eventually the ring’s prerogative,
Which was no less the truth.
Each one insisted that it was impossible
His father could play false with him.
And ere he could suspect so dear and true a father,
He was compelled, how’er inclined to think
The best of them, to accuse his brothers
Of this treacherous act, to unmask the traitors,
And avenge himself.

**Saladin:** Well, and the judge? I’m curious to hear what you will give
The judge to say, Go on.

**Nathan:** The judge said this; Produce your father here
At once, or I’ll dismiss you from this court.
Think you I’m here but to solve riddles?
Or would you wait till the true ring itself will speak?
But stop; I’ve just been told that the right ring
Contains the wondrous gift to make its wearer beloved,
Agreeable alike to God and man.
That must decide, for the false rings will not have the power.
Now which one do the other two love most?
Come, speak out; you’re silent?
Do the rings work only backwards and not outwardly?
Does each one love himself the best?
Then you’re all three deceived deceivers;
None of your rings are genuine.
The genuine ring is no doubt lost.
To hide the loss and to supply its place
The father ordered the other three.

**Saladin:** Splendid, splendid!

**Nathan:** The judge went further on to say;
If you will have my judgment, not my advice,
Then go. But my advice is this;
You take the matter as it stands.
If each one had his ring straight from his father,
So let each believe his ring the true one.
T’is possible your father would no longer tolerate
The tyranny of this one ring in his family,
And surely loved you all—and all alike,
And that he would not two oppress
By favouring the third.
Now then, let each one emulate in affection
Untouched by prejudice. Let each one strive
To gain the prize of proving by results
The virtue of his ring, and aid its powers
With gentleness and heartiest friendliness,
With benevolence and true devotedness to God;
And if the virtue of the ring will then
Have proved itself among your children’s children,
I summon them to appear again
Before this judgment seat,
After a thousand thousand years.
Here then will sit a judge more wise than I,
Who will pronounce. Go you.
So said the modest judge.

Saladin: God, oh God!
Nathan: Saladin, if now you feel yourself to be
That promised sage—
Saladin: (Rushes to him and seize his hand, which
to the end he does not let go)
I dust? I nothing? Oh God!
Nathan: What ails thee, Sultan?
Saladin: Nathan, dear Nathan, your judge’s thousand
Thousand years have not yet fled,
His judgment seat’s not become mine.
Go, Go; but be my friend.

Note

1. This play, first published in 1779, is based on
the parable of the three rings, a story from Gio-
vanni Boccaccio’s Decameron (composed between
1348 and 1353). The play presents Judaism, Chris-
tianity and Islam as three sons of a benevolent
father who gave each an identical ring, although
each claims that his alone is authentic. Nathan, a
Jew, is made the spokesman for the ideals of the
Enlightenment, tolerance, brotherhood and love
of humanity. Lessing regarded his close friend-
ship with Mendelssohn as a testimony to these
ideals. It is thus believed that Nathan was mod-
eled after Mendelssohn.