

## **An Esoteric Reading of Lessing's Ring Parable in *Nathan the Wise*<sup>1</sup>**

For the proponents of Enlightenment probably no adversary was more prominent than organized religion. Lessing for example made himself the champion of historical bible criticism, advocating to bring the light of reason to religious issues. His most famous endeavor in this arena, was the publication of Reimarus' fragments which lead to Lessing's dispute with Goeze the Lutheran Chief Pastor of Hamburg, which resulted with Lessing being officially prohibited to publish pamphlets on theological issues. Lessing circumvented this injunction by writing a play on religion

Lessing's position in *Nathan the Wise* and its *Ring Parable* regarding religion differs from his *Anti-Goeze* and from *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*. Not only did he change the genre he also changed the point of view and subject. Rather than pointing out questionable parts of the Old or New Testament or portraying revelation of religion as a first step in a historical progress towards reason Lessing chooses to use the status quo of the three Abrahamic religions who equally claim to be the true and rightful heirs of a shared religious legacy.

*Nathan the Wise* which is set in Jerusalem at the time of the Third Crusade (1187-1192). The protagonist, a wealthy Jew, is summoned by Saladin, the Muslim ruler of the city, who finds himself in financial straits. Saladin starts the meeting with a tactical ploy; he asks Nathan which one of the three religions "[...] hat dir am meisten eingeleuchtet" (3.5.325)<sup>2</sup>.

The whole situation bears risks for Nathan and he has to maneuver very carefully. The parable as told by Nathan begins with a man who possessed an invaluable ring from a beloved hand. It is significant that the story does not start from the very beginning. The origin of the ring is not known although its attributes point to a divine or supernatural source. The ring had the secret power to make the owner beloved by God and man – if it would be worn in this **Zuversicht** (expectation or maybe faith in a not religious sense) – Therefore the man issued the decree that the ring should always remain in his family. He left it to his most beloved son and decreed that

this son should in turn give it to his most beloved son (without regard to birth) who by the power of the ring would be the prince of the house.<sup>3</sup>

The ring was passed down through generations until one father fails to decide upon one son, in fact promises the ring to all three of his sons. The father has two copies made that cannot be distinguished from the original. After the father's death all three sons claim to be the heir and owner of the true ring and finally bring their dispute before a judge who like everybody else cannot find a distinguishing sign that would mark the original ring.

The judge at first feels unable to solve this mystery but then remembers the magic power of the ring and asks the brothers which of them they like the most. When they remain silent the judge states that the ring's power apparently only works back on them- they love only themselves – and are therefore deceived deceivers.

The judge finishes by saying that he can't give them a verdict but advice:

Es strebe von euch jeder um die Wette,  
Die Kraft des Steins in seinem Ring' an Tag  
Zu legen! (3.7.527-529)

When in a thousand years the rings power shows itself to their children's children they should return and seek then a wiser judge's verdict.<sup>4</sup>

Nathan's – and Lessing's – argument here for tolerance and suspension of judgment is that people take their religion – a question of trust and faith – from those who never deceived them, i.e. their parents, and that nobody should be forced to doubt those whose blood they are and nobody should force another person to doubt his parents.

This is an argument that most people understand on a personal level and is therefore very persuasive. And *family* as a system is at work on various levels in the parable and the play. However, rather than settling the issue through this *ad hominem* argument the parable and the play turn the institution of family into a source of confusion and mistrust. This is further amplified

by the play's plot which evolves around the hidden fact that Recha is not Nathan's biological daughter and that she is the sister of der Tempelherr (both being children of Saladin's brother and a Christian woman). It is a significant contradiction of assumed trust and trustworthiness that the father of the three sons in the parable deceives them. And it is ironic that they distrust each other because their father abused their trust. After investing argument *ad hominem* with the emotional value of trusting one's parents this foundation is shown to be an illusion.

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It seems to be quite clear what the moral of the parable is: ethical action. But the parable contains many unknowns and contradictions and ambivalences that one can end up saying this is the moral but the moral of what?

Nathan's Ring parable contains in fact two parables:

1. The history of the ring which ends with the three brothers standing before a judge with three rings.
2. The failure of the judge to rule on the question of which is the original ring and who is the rightful heir leading to his advice.

The *first parable* is the one that addresses Saladin's original question. Neither Nathan nor the parable explicitly answers this question. Nathan replaces the *first parable* with the *second parable* one that posits the impossibility of a decision and advises action to be judged at a later date which Saladin understands and accepts as the day of judgment or the eternal judgment.

- I. Confronted with such a text one can either follow Saladin and suspend judgment and maybe implicitly agree to the judge's advice to reveal the ring's stone power by ethical action.

- II. Another approach to such a text is to recognize the details, especially in the *first parable*, which produce contradictions and ambivalences, and then maybe to consider whether the *second parable* which Nathan supplies as a "solution" is in fact imperative.

One should keep in mind that Nathan supplies information in the *first parable* that Saladin and the play's audience learn but the judge doesn't. The judge has to rely solely on the brothers' testimony who are to some degree ignorant about their father's actions.

So far commentators have followed Nathan's pivot from the *first parable* to the *second* without looking back. The focus is on the *second parable* and in this perception the *first parable* is reduced by commentators to a facsimile which lacks many of the details which resist easy interpretation. However, it has to be emphasized that Nathan/Lessing provided those details. The question has to be asked why they are part – I would say a constituent part – of the *first parable* and therefore of the *Ring Parable*. The moral of the *Ring Parable* is obvious, the question one should investigate is what is the meaning of the *Ring Parable*.

Let me give you one puzzle as an example that illustrates that the judges advice does not necessarily settle the question nor is it necessary that ethical action will provide discovery or proof which ring is the original. The fact that none of the brother seems to be beloved by the others leads to three different solutions:

- 1) The ring never had that power {which could mean: Lessing criticizes superstition from an Enlightenment point of view.
- 2) The ring lost its power because of the creation of two facsimiles because the creation of two more rings/two more religions was a blasphemous act with consequences}
- 3) All three rings are facsimiles {we don't know what happened to the original true ring}.

Possibility 3) and maybe 2) could mean that rather than continuing a tradition (of preferential love) the father started a new tradition (because he loved them all equally without preference).

Therefore, it might be necessary to establish what the parable is. Does it just consist of its exoteric surface narrative and moral or do we have to take into account various unknowns and contradictions that would point to an esoteric meaning?

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In one important aspect Lessing takes a position in the *Ring Parable* that is closer to Mendelssohn than in his previous theological texts. Mendelssohn's main point of critique regarding *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* was Lessing's anthropological model.<sup>5</sup> Lessing explicitly extended Wolff's anthropology of perfection to all of humanity going through history as a unified agent whereas Mendelssohn insisted that the task of perfection remained on the level of the individual.<sup>6</sup> The advice and hope of the judge still foresees progress measured in generations but leaves it open whether humanity progresses as a whole, or whether children build upon their parents' example but start as rational free individuals.

While the *Ring Parable* seems to skirt the issue whether humanity seen in toto is the agent of perfection, it opens up the question whether one has to see the descendants of the three brothers representing three religions as individuals or group them according to faith and law. Since all follow a law, although different ones, the individual in his progress to perfection is bound by a law that he shares with other members of his tradition.

Grit Schorch's article „»Die Menschen sind nur durch Trennung zu vereinigen!« Mendelssohn and Lessing on Language, Religion, and Politics" uses some of Leo Strauss' writings<sup>7</sup> for a comparative analysis of Lessing's *Ernst und Falk* and Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*. Her thesis is that "Lessing and Mendelssohn both worked on a non-Kantian Enlightenment Critique keeping religion as a

reference point of philosophy." Schorch follows in many regards Strauss who claimed the authority of revelation against philosophy and who sought to connect civil law theory on the one hand with Jewish philosophy on the other. While analyzing *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, a text by Lessing which Mendelssohn objected most strongly to,<sup>8</sup> she does not include *Nathan der Weise* and its centerpiece the *Ring Parable*.

I am going to introduce some of Leo Strauss' ideas and concepts to analyze the *Ring Parable* for several reasons.

**The first reason** to use Strauss is the fact that he refers to Lessing's masonic dialogue *Ernst und Falk* to support his claim that some truths are not to be revealed by philosophers to the general public; certain things have to remain esoteric.<sup>9</sup>

"Lessing [...] was convinced that there are truths which cannot or should not be pronounced, believed that 'all ancient philosophers' had distinguished between their exoteric and esoteric teaching." ( PAW 28)

In that Lessing follows the tradition of Medieval Rationalism.

"[...] again and again they [the Jewish and Islamic philosophers of Medieval Rationalism] enjoin upon the philosophers the duty of **keeping secret** from the unqualified multitude the rationally known truth;"<sup>10</sup> (PL 102)

**The second reason** to use Strauss is his exegesis of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* with its use of contradictions and parables as Maimonides' method of concealing and revealing: concealing as well as revealing some things to the general audience and furnishing in an esoteric manner to a few wise men the elements to work out the hidden revelations:

“The authors of the Bible chose, in order to reveal the truth by not revealing it, and not to reveal it by revealing it, the use of words of certain kinds and of parables and enigmas.”  
(PAW 66)

Another method of not revealing, of hiding something on an esoteric level is contradiction. According to Strauss the task set for the reader of the *Guide* “is not to explain the contradictions, but to find out in each case which of the statements was considered by Maimonides to be true and which he merely used as a means of hiding the truth.” (PAW 69f)<sup>11</sup>

Lessing creates in the *Ring Parable* and its dramatic frame something similar: Nathan, the omniscient narrator, the voice of revelation, speaks of two copies and one original; the interpreter, the judge, assumes three copies and the loss of the original. Nathan, the creator of the parable, speaks through the persona of the omniscient narrator, and creates the interpreter [the judge], who comes up with the theory of three copies. Within that logic, Nathan either lied at the beginning of the parable or the judge is plainly wrong. However, the judge’s theory seems to be supported by the absence of any magic power of any of the rings. But the judge is just the voice of the exoteric level of the parable, he issues the advice to reveal the power by action (not stating that only a single line of tradition would be successful, actually pluralizing the power of the stone to the powers of the stones!). The judge’s mentioning of a future judge is used by Nathan to return the question of which religion is the right one back to Saladin who has to admit that he is not able “to speak” that is to speak the esoteric meaning of the parable.

**The third reason** to use Strauss is his distinction between Judaism and Islam (religions of a God given law) and Christianity (a religion of faith with a credo or creed)<sup>12</sup> which are joined in Saladin’s question – “Was für ein Glaube, was für ein Gesetz” (3.5.324) but are implicitly separated by the parables narrative and conclusion.<sup>13</sup>

Both Boccaccio and Lessing’s *Ring Parable* portray religion as “law” and not so much as faith.

Strauss writes:

"[...] one must take into consideration the essential difference between Judaism and Islam on the one hand and Christianity on the other. Revelation as understood by Jews and Muslims has the character of Law (Torah, Shari'a) rather than of Faith. Accordingly, what first comes to sight of the Islamic and Jewish philosophers in their reflection on Revelation was not a creed or a set of dogmas, but a social order," (PAW 9f)

This distinction can already be found in Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* text.

"I believe Judaism knows nothing of a revealed religion in the sense in which Christians define this term. The Israelites possess a divine legislation - laws, commandments, statutes, rules of conduct, instruction in God's will and in what they are to do to attain temporal and eternal salvation.

Moses, in a miraculous and supernatural way, revealed to them these laws and commandments, but not dogmas, propositions concerning salvation, or self-evident principles of reason. These the Lord reveals **to** us as well as **to** all other men at all times through nature and events but never through the spoken or written word."<sup>14</sup>

Two differences between Boccaccio's and Lessing's versions are that Boccaccio's Saladino only asks about the law, not faith, and he wants to know which **law is the true one** ("la uera")<sup>15</sup> whereas Lessing's Saladin asking for rational arguments wants to know which one makes the most sense to Nathan ("hat dir am meisten eingeleuchtet").

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The main change of Lessing's parable from Boccaccio's version is the **magical power of the ring to make the bearer beloved by all** {which the judge tries to use as a distinguishing factor} It is a strange and rather significant turn that the Lessing's newly added element of a magic charm is not perceptible by anyone after the father's death. The addition of the magic power in the



parable is highly significant on the one hand and on the other hand is made right away irrelevant again by the parable and its dialogue frame. Following Strauss, one could argue that only those capable of recognizing the signs of the esoteric level of text would be able to figure out what it means.

The judge's opinion that their families should strive through actions to reveal this quality is good moral advice but no explanation of the disappearance of the ring's magic power. However, his advice might again point to the esoteric level. If we keep in mind that the copying of the ring was done secretly ("in geheim") by an artist ("Künstler") then we can understand his advice as instructing them to engage in a project of exegesis, exegesis of a law that is not fully revealed.<sup>16</sup>

Die Kraft des Steins in seinem Ring' an Tag  
Zu legen! komme dieser Kraft mit Sanftmuth,  
Mit herzlicher Verträglichkeit, mit Wohlthun,  
Mit innigster Ergebenheit in Gott,  
Zu Hülff! Und wenn sich dann der Steine Kräfte  
Bey 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. (3.7.527-537)

Once the stones' powers "express" themselves in future generations it should be evident who has the right ring. Human agency would have been sufficient to bring to light the magical powers. But why would the descendants then again be called before a judge and why would the "expression" of the ring's power coincide with the end of a millennium?

The reason is twofold and hinges on two aspects that escape Saladin. 1. The judge does not speak of a singular ring's power. That could be explained by the judge's limited understanding and insight. But 2. He does not even speak of the powers of three rings but of the powers of the three stones. In this regard he is partially correct because Nathan at the beginning of the parable spoke of the power of a ring's stone. The judge deviates by pluralizing the stone and the power. Once one is aware of this, one is likely to re-examine the passage of the duplication or triplication, and interestingly it talks of a triplication of the ring, not of the stone. It is possible to read the ring as human artifact and the stone as a creation of nature and/or God. In any case a stone with magic powers is not something that one could attempt to duplicate nor does the parable mention that. Still, one could argue that this is just a minor inconsistency of non-essential details were it not for the fact that assigning the ring's value not to the ring but to its stone is yet another complication added by Lessing to the Boccaccio version that leads to a contradiction that might indicate an esoteric meaning.

One could interpret the stone with its power as God's revelation and the man-made multiple rings as human religion. The esoteric reading of the parable would therefore assume that indeed that there is only one true religion as there is only one magic stone. And while the striving to reveal the stones' powers' through "Wohlthun" is a desired outcome for humanity in general it does not guarantee validation.

All interpretations of the *Ring Parable* agree that "a wiser man" who sits on the chair of judgment refers to God. So, the revelation of the stone's power, or the full revelation of the God-given law will have to be issued by God.

Lessing comes to this non-conclusive conclusion on the exoteric level because of the limits of reason when it comes to revelation. Lessing suspends here his evolutionary chronology of *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* because the contextual frame in the Ring Parable is not reason vs. revelation but reason confronted with the traditions of three religions that all claim to be the recipient of revelation.

While reason in the arena of human action might be able to succeed revelation at a certain stage of human history, reason is not able to establish which tradition of revelation is the true one.<sup>17</sup> However, if one accepts that the Ring Parable has an esoteric level one can assume that it reveals revelation and the true religion. Revelation will then have to be attained through exegesis following Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was read on October 17, 2019, under its previous title "Ethics, Religion and Revelation. Lessing's 'Ring Parable' in Nathan the Wise" at the Annual Conference of Société canadienne d'étude du dix-huitième siècle/Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies in the city of Quebec, Canada.

<sup>2</sup> Quotes from *Nathan the Wise* are given by act, scene, and line numbers according to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 3, (Ed.) Karl Lachmann, Franz Muncker. 3rd edition (Stuttgart, Göschen, 1887).

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly enough we have at the beginning of Abraham's family tree two somewhat complicated successions. Abraham's first-born Ismael is banished with his mother Hagar, Abraham's son Isaac is deceived by Jacob to give him his blessing rather than to the first-born and more beloved Esau.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, this is one of the many inconsistencies/contradictions of the parable: following the logic of the parable it should be their most beloved son's, most beloved son and so on.

<sup>5</sup> "Es ist die praktische Vollkommenheitsanthropologie Christians Wolfts, dessen Seelenlehre an dieser Stelle der Universalgeschichte auch explizit erwähnt wird, die den Garanten einer Fortschrittsentwicklung abgibt. Die menschliche Seele als Kraft der stetigen Vorstellungserweiterung kann gar nicht anders, als sich zunehmend vervollkommen - eine epistemologische und anthropologische Prämisse, die Mendelssohn entschieden teilt. Er verweigert sich allerdings der Übertragung dieses anthropologischen Modells auf die gesamte Menschheit, die Lessing vollzieht." Gideon Stiening, „Historisierte Religion? Mendelssohn und Lessing über den Anspruch der jüdischen Religion," *Lessing Yearbook* 39 (2010), 228.

Ich für meinen Theil habe keinen Begriff von der Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts, die sich mein verewigter Freund Lessing von, ich weiss nicht, welchem Geschichtsforscher der Menschheit hat einbilden lassen. Man stellet sich das collective Ding, das menschliche Geschlecht, wie eine einzige Person vor, und glaubt, die Vorsehung habe sie hierher gleichsam in die Schule geschickt, um aus einem Kinde gleichsam zum Manne erzogen zu werden. Im Grunde ist das menschliche Geschlecht in allen Jahrhunderten, wenn die Metapher gelten soll, Kind und Mann und Greis zugleich, nur an verschiedenen Orten und Weltgegenden. [ ... ] Der Fortgang ist für den einzelnen Menschen, dem die Vorsehung beschieden, einen Theil seiner Ewigkeit hier auf Erden zu zubringen. Jeder gehet das Leben hindurch seinen eigenen Weg; diesen führt der Weg über Blumen und Wiesen, jenen über wüste Ebenen oder über steile Berge und gefährvolle Klüfte. Aber alle kommen auf der Reise weiter und gehen ihres Weges zur Glückseligkeit, zu welcher sie beschieden sind. Aber dass auch das Ganze, die Menschheit hienieden, in der Folge der

Zeiten immer vorwärts rücken, und sich vervollkommen soll. Dieses scheint mir der Zweck der Vorsehung nicht gewesen zu seyn.

Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum, Ausgewählte Werke. Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, (ed.) Christoph Schulte, Andreas Kennecke u. Grazyna Jurewicz (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009), 175 f.

<sup>7</sup> Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, (tr.) Eve Adler (SUNY Press: Albany. 1995). Original German edition: Leo Strauss, *Philosophie und Gesetz* (Berlin, Schocken 1935). Cited as *PL*

Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1988). Cited as *PAW*

<sup>8</sup> *PAW* 29. Ernst and Falk and Jerusalem are the texts where Lessing and Mendelssohn find the most common ground.

<sup>9</sup>

Falk: So denke ich auch. - Die Staaten vereinigen die Menschen, damit durch diese und in dieser Vereinigung jeder einzelne Mensch seinen Theil von Glückseligkeit desto besser und sichrer genießen könne. - Das Totale der einzelnen Glückseligkeiten aller Glieder, ist die Glückseligkeit des Staats. Ausser dieser giebt es gar keine. Jede andere Glückseligkeit des Staats, bey welcher auch noch so wenig einzelne Glieder leiden und leiden müssen, ist Bemäntelung der Tyranney. Anders nichts!

Ernst: Ich möchte das nicht so laut sagen.

Falk: Warum nicht?

Ernst: Eine Wahrheit, die jeder nach seiner eignen Lage beurtheilet, kann leicht gemäßbraucht werden.

Falk: Weißt du, Freund, daß du schon ein halber Freimäurer bist?

Ernst: Ich?

Falk: Du. Denn du erkennst ja schon Wahrheiten, die man besser verschweigt.

Ernst: Aber doch sagen könnte.

Falk: Der Weise kann nicht sagen, was er besser verschweigt.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. *Ernst und Falk. Gespräche für Freymäurer, in Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 13, (ed.) Karl Lachmann, Franz Muncker, . 3rd edition (Leipzig, Göschen, 1897) 352f.

<sup>10</sup> *PL* 102

<sup>11</sup> "Maimonides answers with great clarity that the contradictions met with in the Guide are to be traced back to two reasons: to the requirements of teaching obscure matters, i.e., of making them understood, and to the requirements of speaking, or writing, of such matters. The contradictions of the former are bound to be known to the teacher [...] and they escape the pupil until he has reached an advance stage of training; that is to say they certainly escape the vulgar. But as regards the latter [...] the author must take the utmost care to hide them completely from the vulgar." (*PAW* 68)

"[Maimonides] did not believe [...] that the formal deficiencies of the Bible – for instance, the abrupt changes of subject matter, or repetitions with greater or slighter variations – were due to its having been compiled by unknown redactors from divergent sources. These deficiencies were for him purposeful irregularities, intended to hide and betray a deeper order, a deep, nay, divine meaning. It was precisely this intentional disorder which he took as his model when writing the Guide." (*PAW* 61)

<sup>12</sup> Nicene Creed (First Council of Nicaea (325)): We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father [the only-begotten; that is, of the essence of the Father, God of God,] Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth]; Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down and was incarnate and was made man; He

suffered, and the third day he rose again, ascended into heaven; From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

<sup>13</sup> “Leo Strauss who was a collaborator in the Moses Mendelssohn edition project (the largest edition project ever done at the »Akademie der Wissenschaft des Judentums« in Berlin), was well acquainted with Mendelssohn's German and Hebrew writings. It is hard to ignore that Strauss, who considered Lessing's *Education Essay* as a »completely exoteric« expression borrowed for his critique of the idea of progress in history from Mendelssohn's Lessing critique in *Jerusalem*. Likewise, Strauss' distinction between the Christian and Jewish/Islamic concept of revelation cannot be traced back to Lessing's work but has in fact stringent parallels to Mendelssohn's concept of revelation as developed in the *Jerusalem* text. Only in 1941/52, in his essay *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Strauss explicitly formulates the concept that underlies the entire argumentation in *Philosophy and Law*.” (Grit Schorch, „Die Menschen sind nur durch Trennung zu vereinigen! Mendelssohn and Lessing on Language, Religion, and Politics,” *Lessing Yearbook* 39 [2010], 77)

<sup>14</sup> Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, in *Jerusalem and other Jewish Writings by Moses Mendelssohn*, (ed.) Alfred Jospe (New York: Schocken, 1969), 61.

<sup>15</sup> “po io saper uorrei uoletieri da te quale delle tre leggi tu reputi la uera, cioe la giudaica: o la sarracia: o la cristiana” (prima giornata, nouella de Melchisadech giudeo. Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Decamerone*. Precede: Girolamo Squarzafico: Vita di Boccaccio. - Impresso in Venetia : per Giovanni & Gregorio de Gregorii fratelli, 1492, page 8f. Accessed April 26, 2023 at <https://www.beic.it/biblioteca-digitale/>)

<sup>16</sup> Boccaccio's Melchisadech gives no advice re. actions just says the case is still pending because of the similarities of the rings. However, what is the right acting ('fare') (i.e., practicing the law) is as unsolved as who has ('auere') the right law.

The rings were so similar that the true ring could not be determined. The question then of who Saladin's heir was remained pending, and is still pending. And so I tell you, Sire, of the three religions/laws given to the three peoples by God the father, about which you ask: each one of these religions believes itself directly inherited from God, and is his true law, his true commandments. But the question of which of them really has it and practices it, remains pending, like the story of the rings.

E trouatisi gli anelli sì simili luno alaltro che quale di fusse il uero non si sapea cognoscere, si rimase la questione, qual fusse il uero herede del padre in pedete, e ancor pende. E così ue dico, signor mio, delle tre leggi alli tre populi date da dio padre, alliquali la quistion proponesti: ciascuno la sua uera eredità, la sua vera leggie e i soi comandamenti diritamente si crede hauere affare; ma chi se lhabia, come degli anelli ancora ne pede la questione. (*Decamerone*. page 9. Accessed April 26, 2023 at <https://www.beic.it/biblioteca-digitale/>)

<sup>17</sup> “In the fifties of the 18th century, [Mendelssohn and Lessing] had started to think about philosophy and religion from the skeptical ground that Spinoza and Hume had prepared. As Jacobi did almost 30 years later in the eighties of the 18th century, they faced the limitations of human reason in general. While Jacobi could not suffer the given limitations of the ratio and jumped - with his famous »salto mortale« - back into faith, Lessing did offer several solutions for the problem. With *Nathan, the Wise*, the *Reimarus Papers*, the *Anti-Goeze*, *Ernst and Falk*, the *Education of Mankind* and other texts, Lessing demonstrated that there is more than one perspective to approach the very problem of religion, philosophy and politics.” (Schorch 76f)