

NATHAN THE WISE

A DRAMATIC POEM

BY

GOTTHOLD EPHRAIM LESSING

*"Introite, nam et heic Dii sunt!"
Apud Gellium.¹*

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN

BY PATRICK MAXWELL

Edited, with an Introduction, comprising a Biographical Sketch of the Author, a Critical Analysis of the Poem, and an Account of the Relations between Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn

BY

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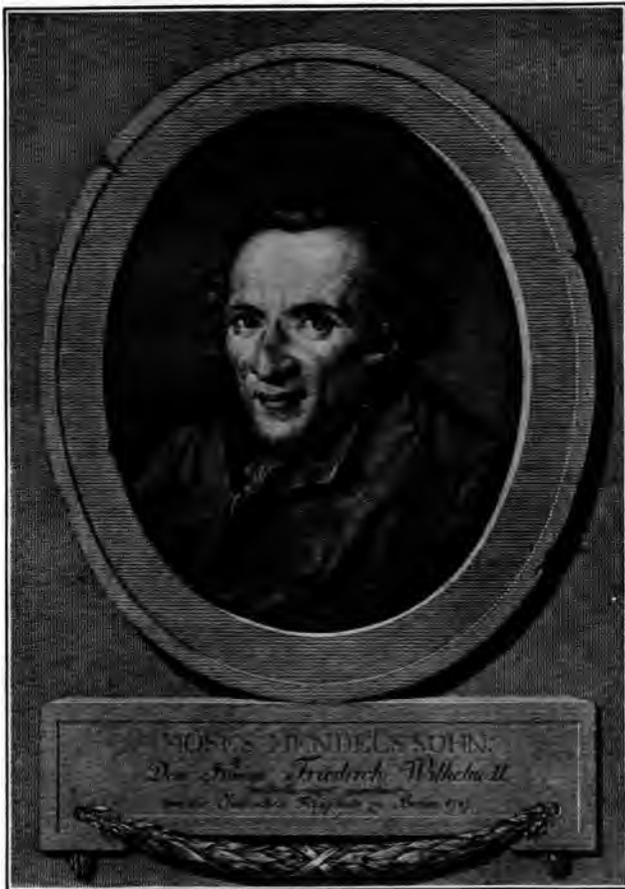
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MOSES MENDELSSOHN
(From a rare engraving by Prof. J. G. Müller, Stuttgart, 1786)

SALADIN.

I want your teaching;
—and since it seems
You are so wise, now tell me, I entreat,
What human faith, what theologic law,
Hath struck you as the truest and the best?

NATHAN.

Sire, I'm a Jew.

SALADIN.

And I a Mussulman ;
And here we have the Christians to boot ;
Of these three faiths one only can be true ;
A man like you would never take his stand
Where chance or birth has cast him ; or, if so,
'Tis from conviction, reasonable grounds,
And choice of that which is the best,—well, then,
Tell me your view, and let me hear your grounds,
For I myself have ever lacked the time
To rack my brains about it. Let me know
The reasons upon which you found your faith—
In confidence, of course—that I may make
That faith my own. How, Nathan, do you start,
And prove me with your eye?—it well may be
No Sultan e'er before had such a whim ;
And yet it seems not utterly beneath
Even a Sultan's notice. Speak then, speak ;
Or haply you would wish a little space
To think it over—well, I give it you.—

(Aside.)

I'd like to know if Sittah's listening now ;
I'll go and see ; I fain would hear from her
How I have played my part.—Now, Nathan,
think,

Think quickly on it—I'll be back anon.

*(He goes into the adjoining chamber, whither
SITTAH had previously gone.)*

SCENE VI.—NATHAN *alone*.

'Tis strange, 'tis marvellous! what can it mean?
What can he want? I thought he wanted gold,
And now it seems that what he wants is *Truth!*
And wants it, too, as prompt and plump as if
Truth were a minted coin—nay, if he sought
Some obsolete coinage valued but by weight;
That might have passed. But such a brand-new
coin,

Vouched by the stamp and current upon change!
No—truth indeed is not a thing like that.
Can it be hoarded in the head of man
Like gold in bags? Nay, which is here the Jew.
He or myself? And yet, might he not well
In truth have sought the truth? But then, the
thought,

The mere suspicion, that he put the case
But as a snare for me! That were *too* small!—
Too small? Nay, what's too petty for the great?
He blurted out the theme so bluntly too;
Your friendly visitor is wont to knock
And give you warning ere he beats you up.
I must be on my guard. How best be that?
I cannot play the downright bigot Jew,
Nor may I wholly cast my Jewish slough,
For if I'm not the Jew, he then might ask
Why not a Mussulman?—I have it now!
Ay, this may serve me—idle tales amuse
Not children only—well, now let him come.

SCENE VII.—SALADIN *and* NATHAN.

SALADIN (*to himself*).

And so the coast was clear.

(*To NATHAN.*)

I trust I've come
Not too soon back; I hope you've ended now
Your meditation—tell me the result;
There's none to hear us.

NATHAN.

Would that all the world
Might hear our colloquy!

SALADIN.

Is Nathan then
So certain of his point? Ha! that I call
A wise man truly—ne'er to blink the truth,
To hazard everything in quest of it;
Body and soul itself, and goods and life.

NATHAN.

Ay, when 'tis needful, or can profit us.

SALADIN.

Henceforth I'll hope to have a right to bear
One of the many names by which I'm dubbed,
"Reformer of the World and of the Law."

NATHAN.

In sooth it is a fair and goodly name;
But, Sultan, ere I tell you all my thought,
Let me relate to you a little tale.

SALADIN.

Why not? I've ever had a love for tales
When well narrated.

NATHAN.

Ah, the telling well,
That scarcely is my forte.

SALADIN.

Again your pride,
Aping humility—tell on, tell on.

NATHAN.

Well then:—¹In hoar antiquity there dwelt
In eastern lands a man who had received
From a loved hand a ring of priceless worth.
An opal was the stone it bore, which shot
A hundred fair and varied hues around,
And had the mystic power to render dear
Alike to God and man whoever wore
The ring with perfect faith. What wonder, then,
That eastern man would never lay it off,
And further made a fixed and firm resolve
That it should bide for ever with his race.
For this he left it to his dearest son,
Adding a stringent clause that he in turn
Should leave it to the son he loved the most,
And that in every age the dearest son,
Without respect to seniority,
By virtue of the ring alone should be

¹See Note 31.

The lord of all the race. Sultan, I ask
If you have marked me well.

SALADIN.

Ay, ay,—proceed.

NATHAN.

And thus the ring came down from sire to son,
Until it reached a father of three sons
Each equally obedient to his will,
And whom accordingly he was constrained
To love alike. And yet from time to time,
Whene'er the one or other chanced to be
Alone with him, and his o'erflowing heart
Was not divided by the other two,
The one who stood beside him still would seem
Most worthy of the ring; and thus it chanced
That he by kindly weakness had been led
To promise it in turn to each of them.
This state of matters lasted while it could,
But by-and-by he had to think of death,
And then this worthy sire was sore perplexed.
He could not brook the thought of breaking
faith
With two dear sons to whom he'd pledged his
word;
What now was to be done? He straightway
sends
In secret for a skilled artificer,
And charges him to make two other rings
Precisely like the first, at any cost.
This the artificer contrives to do,

And when at last he brings him all three rings
 Even the father can't say which is which.
 With joyful heart he summons then his sons,
 But singly and apart, bestows on each
 His special blessing, and his ring—and dies.
 You hear me, Sultan?

SALADIN (*looking aside in perplexity*).

Ay, I hear, I hear;
 Come, make an end of it.

NATHAN.

I'm at the end;
 For what's to follow may be well conceived.
 Scarce was the father dead, each several son
 Comes with his ring and claims to be the lord
 Of all his kindred. They investigate,
 Recriminate, and wrangle—all in vain—
 Which was the true original genuine ring
 Was undemonstrable—

(*After a pause, during which he closely marks
 the SULTAN.*)

Almost as much
 As now by us is undemonstrable
 The one true faith.

SALADIN.

Nathan, is this to pass
 For answer to my question?

NATHAN.

Sultan, no;
 'Tis only meant to serve as my excuse

For better answer. How could I presume
E'er to pronounce distinction 'tween the rings
The father purposely designed to be
Quite indistinguishable?

SALADIN.

Rings, forsooth!
Trifle not with me thus. I should have thought
The three religions which I named to you
Were easy to distinguish, if alone
By difference of dress and food and drink.

NATHAN.

But not by fundamental difference.
Are they not founded all on history,
Traditional or written? History
Must still be taken upon trust alone;
And who are they who best may claim our
trust?

Surely our people, of whose blood we are;
Who from our infancy have proved their love,
And never have deceived us, save, perchance,
When kindly guile was wholesomer for us
Than truth itself. Why should I less rely
Upon my ancestors than you on yours;
Or can I ask of you to give the lie
To your forefathers, merely to agree
With mine?—and all that I have said applies
To Christians as well. Is this not so?

SALADIN (*aside*).

Now, by the living God, the man is right;
I must be silent.

NATHAN.

Let us now return
Once more unto our rings. As I have said,
The sons now sued each other; each of them
Swore to the judge he had received his ring
Straight from his father's hand—as was the
fact—

And that, too, after he had long enjoyed
His father's promise to bequeath the ring
To him alone—which also was the truth;
Each vowed the father never could have proved
So false to him; and rather than believe
A thing like this of such a loving sire,
He was constrained—however loath he was
To think unkindly of his brethren—
To charge them both with some nefarious trick,
And now he would unmask their treachery
And be avenged for such a cruel wrong.

SALADIN.

Well, and the Judge? for I am fain to hear
What you will make *him* say,—tell on, tell on.

NATHAN.

The Judge pronounced—Unless you bring your
sire,
And place him here before the judgment-seat,
I must dismiss your suit. Think you I'm here
For solving riddles?—or perhaps you wait
Until the genuine ring declares itself.
Yet stay—you said the genuine ring contains

The magic power to make its wearer loved
More than all else, in sight of God and man ;
This must decide the case—the spurious ring
Will not do this—say, which of you is he
The other two most love?—what, no reply?
Your rings would seem to work reflexively,
Not on external objects; since it seems
Each is enamoured of himself alone.
Oh, then, all three of you have been deceived,
And are deceivers too; and all three rings
Are spurious alike—the genuine ring
Was lost, most likely, and to hide its loss,
And to supply its place, your father caused
These three to be made up instead of it.

SALADIN.

Bravo! bravo!

NATHAN.

And then the Judge resumed—
Belike ye would not relish my advice
More than the judgment I have now pronounced ;
In that case, go—but my advice is this:
Accept the case precisely as it stands;
If each of you in truth received his ring
Straight from his father's hand, let each believe
His own to be the true and genuine ring.
Perhaps your father wished to terminate
The tyranny of that especial ring
'Mid his posterity. Of this be sure,
He loved you all, and loved you all alike,

Since he was loath to injure two of you
 That he might favor one alone; well, then,
 Let each now rival his unbiased love,
 His love so free from every prejudice;
 Vie with each other in the generous strife
 To prove the virtues of the fings you wear;
 And to this end let mild humility,
 Hearty forbearance, true benevolence,
 And resignation to the will of God,
 Come to your aid,—and if, in distant times,
 The virtues of the genuine gem be found
 Amid your children's children, they shall then,
 When many a thousand years have rolled away,
 Be called once more before this judgment-seat,
 Whereon a wiser man than I shall sit
 And give his verdict—now, begone. Thus spake
 That sapient Judge.

SALADIN.

My God!

NATHAN.

Oh, Saladin,
 Could you but be that wiser promised man!

SALADIN (*stepping forward and grasping NATHAN'S
 hand*).

Dust that I am and nothingness!—oh, no,
 Oh, no!

NATHAN.

What ails thee, Sultan?

SALADIN.

**Nathan, no;
The thousand thousand years of that wise Judge
Are not yet passed; nor is his judgment-seat
For Saladin,—now go—but be my friend.**