

[...]

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 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 he brings
The rings 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 hear me, Sultan?
SALADIN (*who, taken aback, has turned away*): I hear,

I hear you!—Finish now your fable
Without delay.—I'm waiting!

NATHAN: I am done.
For what ensues is wholly obvious.—
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 trifle 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 turn about.—Can I demand
That to your forebears you should give the lie
That mine be not gainsaid? Or turn about.
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 preferred complaint;
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; of 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: And then, 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'll bid you leave
My judgment seat. 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 must decide!
For spurious rings can surely not do that!—

Whom then do two of you love most? Quick, speak!
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 one.—Possibly 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.

SALADIN: God! God!

NATHAN: Now, Saladin,

If you would claim to be that wiser man,

The promised one . . .

SALADIN (*rushing to him and seizing his hand, which he retains*):

I, dust? I, nothing? God!

NATHAN: What is the matter, Saladin?

SALADIN: Dear Nathan!—

The thousand thousand years your judge assigned

Are not yet up.—His judgment seat is not

For me.—Go!—Go!—But be my friend.

Quelle:

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