

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_evangelical\\_quarterly.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php)

## THE PROBLEM OF REVELATION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY GERMANY: WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO LESSING (*concluded*)

by LEONARD DE MOOR

**I**N this concluding section of his study of Lessing, Dr. De Moor pays special attention to "Nathan the Wise" and the "Axioms". His final remarks on the relation of revelation to history point to a critical question which is the object of animated debate today. Indeed, Lessing appears to anticipate those of our own contemporaries who reject "salvation-history" and propositional revelation alike.

**A** CONSIDERATION of the other major feature of Lessing's concept of revelation, namely, his advocacy of ethics in preference to the bibliolatry characteristic of the Protestantism of his day, now demands our attention. The idea of historical relativism involved in Lessing not only an exaltation of reason, but also a polemic against what he considered an undue veneration of the Bible in his day. In the place of the latter there was substituted a new emphasis upon ethics. When the truth of any religion is considered to be independent of historical attestation, it is natural that refuge should be taken in the reason. This was Lessing's reaction.

It would be a mistake to believe that Lessing's piety was wholly rational. The measure of the reasonableness of revelation was for him the ethical fruits which blossomed therefrom. If the essence of any historical religion is not to be found in past historical phenomena, nor in the Confessions of the Church, or the elaborate systems of logical demonstrations in the Wolffian style, it must be discovered in the kindness and goodwill obtaining in individual men and in society. His was not a cold, intellectual rationalism, but an ethically mellow humanism, which transcended not only confessional barriers, but the gulf between Christianity and other religions. For religion is a spirit, a life, not a creed.

This is the real significance of Lessing's controversy with Goeze. And his famous drama *Nathan the Wise* (1778-9) was written mainly to teach this truth. For if, in the *Education*, Lessing rejected the perfection of revelation and replaced it with the

conception of perfectibility, in his *Nathan* he wished above all to repudiate the idea that on an historical or doctrinal basis any religion, even Christianity, could lay claim to an exclusively true revelation. That claim to genuineness or truth must be "made good" by the ethical fruits exhibited. This is the final test.

When, as a consequence of the *Fragments* controversy, the Brunswick consistory was given ducal authority to demand from Lessing the surrender of the manuscript of the *Fragmentist*, and to withdraw from the author the freedom from censorship hitherto enjoyed, Lessing wrote to Elise, the daughter of Reimar, "I must try whether they will let me preach undisturbed, at least from my old pulpit, the stage".<sup>1</sup> The fruit of this plan was the creation of the drama, *Nathan the Wise*.

It is in the famous "parable of the three rings" (Act 3, Scene 7) that Saladin, the Turkish Sultan, has put to Nathan, the Jew, the searching question: "What belief, what law, has most commended itself to you?" In answer to this test question Nathan tells the story of the "three rings", in which Lessing "has condensed the whole pith of his poem", and this kernel, put into the mouth of Nathan, Lessing has himself declared to be his own "disposition towards all positive (organized) religions".<sup>2</sup> The story follows:

In a grey 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 colours,  
 And had the secret power of giving favour,  
 In sight of God and man, to him who wore it  
 With a believing heart. What wonder then  
 This Eastern man would never put the ring  
 Off from his finger, and should so provide  
 That to his house it be preserved forever?  
 Such was the case. Unto the best-beloved  
 Among his sons he left the ring, enjoining  
 That he in turn bequeath it to the son  
 Who should be dearest; and the dearest ever,  
 In virtue of the ring, without regard  
 To birth, be of the house the prince and head.

From son to son the ring descending, came  
 To one, the sire of three; of whom all three  
 Were equally obedient; whom all three  
 He therefore must with equal love regard.

<sup>1</sup> James Sime, *Lessing* (Trübner, London, 2nd edition, 1890), Vol. II, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Adolph Stahr, *The Life and Works of G. E. Lessing* (E.T. by E. P. Evans), Vol. II, pp. 317, 314.

And yet from time to time now this, now that,  
 And now the third—as each alone was by,  
 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 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 artist to him, and commands of him  
 Two other rings, the pattern of his own;  
 And bids him neither cost nor pains to spare  
 To make them like, precisely like to that.  
 The artist's skill succeeds. He brings the rings,  
 And e'en the father cannot tell his own.  
 Relieved and joyful, summons he his sons,  
 Each by himself; to each one by himself  
 He gives his blessing, and his ring—and dies.

The father

Was scarcely dead, when each brings forth his ring,  
 And claims the headship. Questioning ensues,  
 The genuine ring was not to be distinguished—  
 As undistinguishable as with us  
 The true religion.

And when Saladin now puts in the objection:

The religions (Christian, Jewish, and Mohammedan)  
 I named to you are plain to be distinguished  
 E'en in the dress, e'en in the food and drink,

Nathan continues by replying:

In all except the grounds on which they rest.  
 Are they not founded all 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,  
 Ne'er disappointed, 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 belie  
 Your fathers, and transfer your faith to mine?  
 Or yet, again, holds not the same with Christians?

Each of the brothers, then, having brought a charge of treachery against his two other brothers, in order to remove from the memory of so dear a father the stain which would indicate that he had dealt unfairly—they appear before the judge, who addresses them as follows:

## Produce your father

At once before me, else from my tribunal  
 Do I dismiss you. Think you I am here  
 To guess your riddles? Either would you wait  
 Until the genuine ring shall speak? But hold!  
 A magic power in the true ring resides,  
 As I am told, to make its wearer loved—  
 Pleasing to God and man. Let that decide.  
 For in the false can no true virtue lie.  
 Which one among you, then, do two love best?  
 Speak! Are you silent? Work the rings but backward,  
 Not outward? Loves each one himself the best?  
 Then cheated cheats are all of you! The rings  
 All three are false. The genuine ring was lost;  
 And to conceal, supply the loss, the father  
 Made three in place of one.

## The judge continues:

Go, therefore, . . . unless my counsel  
 You'd have in place of sentence. It were this:  
 Accept the case exactly as it stands.  
 Had each his ring directly from his father,  
 Let each believe his own is genuine.  
 'Tis possible your father would no longer  
 His house to one ring's tyranny subject;  
 And certain that all three of you he loved,  
 Loved equally, since two he would not humble,  
 That one might be exalted. Let each one  
 To his unbought, impartial, love aspire;  
 Each with the others vie to bring to light  
 The virtue of his 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  
 Among your children's children be revealed,  
 I bid you in a thousand thousand years  
 Again before this bar. A wiser man  
 Than I shall occupy this seat, and speak.  
 Go!—Thus the modest judge dismissed them.<sup>3</sup>

In a paragraph of the preface to the *Education*, written only a year after the completion of the *Nathan*, we have in his own words a summary of what he had desired, in the relatively veiled language of poetry, to teach in his drama. He tells us:

Each little sect or religion has, doubtless, had some germ of the truth within it, which has rendered it subservient to the great purpose of fertilizing the world—but so long as the professors of either of them think that they are favoured children of the divine Father, whom he regards with a complacency with which he does

<sup>3</sup> G. E. Lessing, *Nathan the Wise* (E.T. by Ellen Frothingham), Act III, Scene VII.

not view the rest of humanity, so long is the fulness of God's idea not attained by them.<sup>4</sup>

In the *Nathan* we see that what distinguished one religion from another is not the fact that one is established upon historical facts while the others are not. For they all claim to have their origin in historical facts. Instead, the truth of religion is subjectively created by the attitude and bearing of the person. Not the possession of the ring (historical and demonstrative proofs) but instead, the exemplification of the qualities of love, meekness, sympathy, benevolence, and inward loyalty are the marks of true religion. It is pure superstition to believe that some magic virtue resides in the ring itself (historical facts).

Nor are the depths of his poem fathomed when it is said that what is taught here is the necessity of religious tolerance. For when we speak of tolerance we always mean that each of the religions concerned has its characteristically unique conception, and that each should remain true to its own insights, while granting the similar privilege to others. But in *Nathan* that is not the ultimate. For here the enlightened members of the various religious communions are in reality all adherents of the same religion of humanity. There is an absolute identity between them all, and so there is nothing left to tolerate in each other.

True religion is not a mere gift of supernatural revelation; it must rather be acquired by the peculiar power of beneficent love. It is but a myth that there was one original ring. Genuineness is a quality that must be creatively built rather than lazily and complacently inherited. How decisively he severs ethical attainment from metaphysical conceptions, which in turn claim to be established upon history, is most distinctly set forth in a little fragment, found among his papers, on *The Religion of Christ*.

He says:

Whether Christ was more than a man is a problem: that he was a real man is certain. Consequently, the religion of Christ and the Christian religion are two quite different things. The religion of Christ is that which he himself as man recognized and practised, which every man must wish to have in common with him, in proportion as the character ascribed to Christ as a mere man is sublime and lively. The Christian religion is that which assumes that he was more than a man, and makes him, as such, an object of worship. How both these religions, the religion of Christ and the Christian religion, can exist in Christ as in one and the same person, is inconceivable. It is scarce possible that the doctrines

<sup>4</sup> *Education of the Human Race* (E.T. by F. W. Robertson, London,<sup>3</sup> 1881), Preface, xiv, xv.

and principles of the two should be found in one and the same book.<sup>5</sup>

Thus Lessing became the founder of the eternal religion of love, of ethical, practical Christianity based upon religious sentiment, which no historical claim can get a monopoly upon, and which no historical criticism can harm nor doubt destroy. A high human ethic, that is the essence which in the laboratory of Lessing's thought was produced as the precipitate of religion, as well as the truth of Christianity.

If a man is not patient, sincere, devout, filled with a large and noble charity, it is a matter of utter indifference what he believes; these qualities alone make him a truly religious man. And his religion will not of itself impart them. Character is a flower that comes of a process of thoughtful culture; it is the crown of ceaseless inward effort.<sup>6</sup>

And the importance of this new conception of religion consists in the fact that more and more it has become articulate in the thought and feeling of Protestant Christians. As one German writer has put it:

It is not easy to find a didactic poem which has been so largely taken up into the flesh and blood of a people as *Nathan* has us Germans; even today the same expresses the real religious creed of the large majority of our educated class.<sup>7</sup>

There was another famous religious poetic production in Germany at this time. It was the *Messiah* of Klopstock.<sup>8</sup> Here we have a glorification of the objective act of redemption of the incarnate and dying Son of God, whom Lessing denies. In *Nathan* we have a Jesus who merely in passing is once referred to as a relatively good man (2: 1). We see the contrast. In Klopstock we have the last poetic exponent of the old Protestantism. With Lessing the new age was dawning: the age of the glorification of man, wherein ethics gained the ascendancy.

It is in this light that we must understand Lessing's protest against the intellectualism of Reimarus, and in that same light his bitter conflict with Goeze must be studied. For it was only natural that one who had come to conceive the essence of

<sup>5</sup> As quoted by James Sime, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 216-17. Passage verified in Bong's edition, part 23, pp. 352-3: "Die Religion Christi".

<sup>6</sup> James Sime, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 252.

<sup>7</sup> Willibald Beyschlag, *Lessings Nathan der Weise und das Positive*, p. 6: "Es gibt nicht leicht ein Lehrgedicht, das einem Volke so sehr in Fleisch und Blut übergegangen wäre, wie Nathan uns Deutschen; noch heute drückt dasselbe das eigentliche religiöse Bekenntniss der grossen Mehrzahl unserer Gebildeten aus".

<sup>8</sup> Gottfried Fittbogen, *Die Religion Lessings* (Mayer and Müller, Leipzig, 1923), p. 148.

Christianity as ethical culture should protest with emphasis against what he considered the ossification of faith in both the dogmatism and confessional bibliolatry of his opponent. So positive was Lessing that he represented the true spirit of the Reformation, and that it was his conscientious duty to oppose the externalism of his day, that he called Luther to witness that he shared his spirit. As Luther had freed his generation from the yoke of tradition, so he claimed it to be his duty to free his age of the yoke of the letter of Scripture, and all doctrinal systems which might be thought deducible from it.

Already when he wrote his notes in comment upon the *Fragments* we find that he was in possession of a complete philosophy of the Bible. In the third and fourth paragraph of these notes he stated the 10 axioms, which, when attacked by Goeze, he later defended in the famous writing *Axioms: if, in matters of this sort, there exist such*.

These axioms, as they originally appeared, follow:

- (1) The letter is not the spirit, and the Bible is not religion.
- (2) Consequently, objections to the letter and to the Bible are not also objections to the spirit and to religion.
- (3) For the Bible obviously contains more than belongs to religion:
- (4) And it is mere hypothesis that the Bible is equally infallible as regards this excess.
- (5) There was also a religion before there was a Bible.
- (6) Christianity existed before the evangelists and apostles had written. Some time elapsed before the first of them wrote, and a very considerable time before the whole canon was completed.
- (7) However much, therefore, may depend upon these writings, the whole truth of the Christian religion cannot possibly rest upon them.
- (8) If there was a period when Christianity had taken possession of many souls, and when, nevertheless, not a letter of what has come down to us was written, then it must be possible that all of which the evangelists and apostles have written might be lost, and yet the religion taught by them would abide.
- (9) Religion is not true because the evangelists and apostles taught it; but they taught it because it is true.
- (10) By its inner (religious) truth the Scripture must be interpreted; and no traditions or transmitted records can give it inner truth if it has none.<sup>9</sup>

The nature of the attack upon bibliolatry contained in these statements can be seen even more clearly when we consider

<sup>9</sup> The translation of these Axioms is after Stahr's rendition, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 262-3. I have compared this translation with the original of the "Zusätze des Herausgebers" in *Fragmente des Wolfenbüttelschen Ungenannten* by G. E. Lessing (Sanders, Berlin, 4th edition, 1835), pp. 410-11.



how Lessing answered<sup>10</sup> Goeze's attacks<sup>11</sup> upon them. Lessing does not think it fair of Goeze to have interpreted him as saying, in axiom 3, that the Bible does not contain religion. He admits that it contains religion, but insists that this is not the same as saying that the Bible is religion, which is the impossible position which he believed Goeze to hold. And so he ridiculed him for such a slavish, unthinking worship of a book.

Lessing retorts:

Dear Herr Pastor, if you have set to work in this way with all your opponents! Are, then, 'to be' and 'to contain' the same things? Are then the propositions identical—the Bible contains religion—the Bible is religion? In Hamburg you will certainly not dispute that there is a great difference between gross and nett. There where so many articles have their fixed tare, could they not allow me a small tare upon the Holy Scripture, upon such a precious article? . . . How if there is not a little in the Bible that serves neither for the illustration nor the confirmation of the least important principle of religion? What other good Lutheran theologians have maintained of whole books of the Bible, may I not maintain of single notices in this or that book? At any rate, one must be a rabbi or a manufacturer of sermons to find out any way of bringing into relation with religion the Yaiman of Anah, the Cherethites and the Pelethites of David, the cloak which Paul forgot at Troas, and a hundred other such things.<sup>12</sup>

This established, then, that there is much in the Bible which, from the standpoint of religion, is superfluous, and not even, as Goeze had suggested, necessary for explanation and confirmation of what is clearly religious, the first axiom follows logically as well as the second, and the fourth.

For the fifth and following axioms and their defence he drew upon the results of his studies of the Church Fathers which engaged his attention at an earlier period of his life. He was of the conviction that when the bishops of the Early Church quoted Scripture, they did so in support of their spirit-led convictions, but that they did not draw upon the Scriptures as the original source of their views.<sup>13</sup> In short, the truth of the Christian

<sup>10</sup> *The Axiomata wenn es deren in dergleichen Dingen giebt* (Braunschweig: in der Buchhandlung des Fürst. Waisenhauses, 1778), contains Lessing's defence of his originally stated axioms.

<sup>11</sup> Goeze's answer to Lessing's notes on the fragments appeared under the title: *Etwas Vorläufiges gegen des Herrn Hofrath Lessings mittelbare und unmittelbare Angriffe auf unsere allerheiligste Religion* (Hamburg, 1778). This, and other controversial writings against Lessing are found in *Goezes Streitschriften gegen Lessing*, edited by Erich Schmidt (Göschel, Stuttgart, 1893).

<sup>12</sup> *Axiomata*, I (3). The translation is that of James Sime, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 210.

<sup>13</sup> *Axiomata*, VI (6).

religion is not dependent upon the written books. This was not equivalent to saying that the truth of the Christian religion is independent of the content of these books. Only, Lessing argued that the content could be preserved and passed on through history orally as well as in written documented form. Failure to recognize this caused Lessing to criticize Goeze most severely. Goeze is limiting God by saying that only in this one way can God make himself known.<sup>14</sup>

And the last three axioms concentrate upon the question as to what it is that establishes the truth of Christianity. Not the fact that the apostles taught it makes it true, nor that it was written down. The revealing value of the Christian religion inheres in the truth which lies available to be written down, and which could have been conveyed to us today through other means than documented Scriptures.

From these and the many other sources to which we have now had occasion to refer, we have seen that the truth of Christianity for Lessing is comprised always in the ethical values entertained by Christians. These, so he argues, existed before the written Scriptures, and so they can and do exist today—apart from any fettering to the Scriptures. This is the second and last important cross-section of his revelation concept. It was in opposition to what he believed was the uncritical bibliolatry of Protestant Scholasticism that he became the exponent of this ethical humanism which was entirely divorced from the events traditionally held by Christians as the foundation not only for doctrine, but for ethical living. The only sense in which this venerable past came into Lessing's theological construct was in the belief that they might once have served as anticipations of moral insights which man has now, however, autonomously attained. For the mature man of today these historical magnitudes can at the most serve as symbols.

Finally, we need to make a short statement of what may be accepted as the contributions which the eighteenth century, and particularly Lessing, made to a partial clarification of the concept of revelation. But more particularly we need to make clear what features of the problem were left unresolved and passed on to succeeding Christian thinkers.

I think we can state the positive contributions and the unresolved issues in a series of pairs. For at each point that Lessing helped to settle an issue, raised by his reflection on the Christianity of

<sup>14</sup> *Axiomata*, VII (7).

his day, he raised a new problem in the very answer he proposed.

Lessing's protest against bibliolatry did much to drive the Protestant Church to its original principle that the Bible as a book may not be identified with revelation, but must serve rather as an organ of a revelation which is to be subjectively experienced. The Bible, it came again to be understood, was not so much a deposit, as a channel of the divine. This was a great gain, for it rescued the content of revelation from being imprisoned in what is inadequate to hold it. No organ, nor all of them together, can adequately enshrine divine revelation. Then we would no longer have revelation but facts. At this point Lessing did a good service.

But Lessing stressed so much the end-result of revelation, the ethical invigoration and enlivening conveyed in revelation, and while doing so made such onslaughts upon the external or objective content, that he created the new problem of the relation of ethical and spiritual truth to the divine. And since he realized his success in divorcing dynamic truth from a book in which his age tended to conceive the revelation to be enshrined, he overlooked the deeper and essential problem of the relation of ethics to the divine: to God, who is always the content of revelation, and who, for the religious subject, is always in some sense an object over against man. In Lessing's system the divine was only a natural, rational content.

Again he justly reminded us that we cannot begin to talk of revelation until we have taken in the experiencing subject. Here his teaching was clearly in the direction of a restoration of original Reformation truth. That was both Luther's and Calvin's conception.

But how can any human organs of receptivity, whether one's moral sense or his rationality, enshrine divine truth and life? How can they even serve as more adequate channels of divine truth or life than others? Are these any more appropriate vessels for the bearing of revelation than the Bible? Or are the two mutually exclusive?

And lastly, though with another intention, Lessing helped to establish more firmly than before, the belief that all organized religions, including Christianity, are based upon historical truths.

But is this historically mediated revelation of the divine in such precarious straits as Lessing makes out, because, like all history, it is necessarily open to critical, historical scrutiny? Also does the fallibility and uncertainty of historical events justify the retention of truths taught thereby only as anticipations of or symbols of truths allegedly discovered independently thereof?

That is, is revelation kept inviolate when allegedly historical events are rationalized, as Lessing and all Rationalists do?<sup>15</sup>

These are the problems which Lessing passed on to his spiritual successors. He raised issues which did not die with him but survived to constitute the central issues of subsequent theological thought. They serve as the capital with which Schleiermacher began.

*Hastings College,  
Hastings, Nebraska.*

<sup>15</sup> [A new approach to this problem is presented by Daniel P. Fuller in *Easter Faith and History* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), of which a British edition (to be reviewed in the *QUARTERLY*) will shortly appear, we hope. ED.]