Facing Evil: The Parable of the Ring in the Hands of Abraham Abulafia and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing

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There is a folktale, most commonly shaped in the form of a parable, and most often involving three rings of symbolic value, representing Judaism, Christianity and Islam. This tale has been remolded, since its first written appearance around 1200 C.E., by poetic writers including Dante, Boccaccio, the Jewish mystic Abraham Abulafia and, centuries later, by Lessing. Besides appearing in various periods, it has occurred in many languages and cultures, among them Italian, French, Arabic, Hebrew, and German. Almost all the dozens of extant versions have been translated into English, or at the very least recounted in summary. As parable, a deliberate riddle-like quality pertains to it; and the elements of secrecy disclose a threefold layering, each hinging on a theodicy, if not also theurgical activity.

At the first layer, each re-emergence of the tale takes place in a historical setting of severe clashes of religions, evidenced either through the preliminary feints by pen in bitter theological disputations, attacks and counterattacks, or, alternatively and eventually, through lunges of swords in bloody persecutions. Cloaked in the protective padding of allegory and

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symbolism, and embedded in a larger work (as for instance in Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, Abulafia's *Light of the Intellect*, and Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*), the parable is, on one level, invariably a response to a particular situation, aiming to be a corrective as well as a depiction of specific personages within the given author's environment.

Secondly, with their poetic sensitivity to the perceived evil of the era, the various narrators of the tale draw from this parable in order to ask perhaps the broadest and most comprehensive question of all: the question of origins and ultimate ends, with a focus on the between, such that the oneness and unity of truth can be made sense of within the differences and differences of multiplicity. This general thrust of theodicies, whether in Voltaire's and Leibniz's resolutions or in Doestoevsky's relentless intensifying of non-resolution, is certainly an aspect of the tale of the ring, which insists on acceptance (or non-acceptance) of the unknown dimension, the limits of knowing at the borders of the divine. The secrecy in this layer is explicitly revealed as not devised by but beyond human hands.

Thirdly, and we are now at the layer for this paper's primary concern: the acceptance of the unknown, or of knowing only at the end of time, within the framework of this parable, implies two things. It implies on the one hand the pacification of inner reactions to temporal evils by somehow precipitously flying off imaginatively to supra-worldly realms of truth in the quietness and peacefulness of the before and after of time. It implies also, on the other hand, the dismissal of the world that is to say of the dynamics of divine creation, revelation, and redemption, and by extension the dismissal of an aspect of God himself with regard to his participation in world time. Already in every monotheistic theodicy is featured the notion that evil either entails the absence of good, or is on its way to being transformed into an ultimate good. Evil as an autonomous power is of course forbidden to a monotheistic worldview. So this third layer of secrecy stops at or enters the daring ground of confronting evil as an aspect of being within the godhead: an attempt at conceiving duality without dualism.

My focus will be a study of the two versions of the parable, concentrating on this third layer of secrecy that comes alive in the respective hands of Abulafia (1240-c.1291) and Lessing (1729-1781). A

consideration of Walter Benjamin's notion that the most fertile site for redemption is located at the cut, the wound, or the between, will inform the slant of the focus. From this vantage point, for example, I intend to extend Franz Rosenzweig's (1886-1929) brief commentary on Lessing's version. Otherwise admiring Lessing's noble achievement and unique perspective concerning the Enlightenment ideal of tolerance, Rosenzweig is disturbed by the shallowness in the overhasty conflating of differences between human beings housed in different religious institutions, as well as by the final scene "where the archetypal difference of man and woman is denied in favor of the cool, fish-blooded brotherliness and sisterliness." It is precisely difference that is not to be bridged or conflated, but mended along the timelines of the rent fabric of monotheistic oneness. In defense of Lessing's "failure," Rosenzweig contends that Lessing's pen strokes were intended as feints, but were mistaken by his readers as lunges.

The kabbalist Abraham Abulafia incorporated a version of the parable in one of his works, *Or ha-Sekhel, The Light of the Intellect,* which until its 1999 publication in the original Hebrew had been preserved in manuscript form alone in the Vatican. The notion of evil as explored in Jewish mystical logic is a demonstration of coincidences of opposites borne along in non-static images. Kabbalistic thought imagines a dark side of God that is at once within and other than God, which can be characterized as the cut, the wound, or the between of God. The dark is symbolically imagined as the feminine, which will ultimately be transformed into the light, symbolically regarded as the masculine. Abulafia's version emphasizes, not differences between current and future knowledge of which religion of all is the religion of Truth, but the difference between the lack of the readiness for that Truth on earth accompanied by the withholding of it, and the moment where the divinity perceives human readiness for the reception of Truth's disclosure. For contextualizing Abulafia's version in the wider context of his particular brand of mysticism, Elliot R. Wolfson's insights into kabbalistic thinking will prove helpful to this study.

It seems to be of timely interest to raise, once again, the resources of reflective literary imagery inscribed in this intriguing and alluring parable of the ring.

Lessing's Version of the Parable

Let us begin by recounting the most famous version, which appears as a jewel-like inset in Lessing's dramatic poem, *Nathan the Wise.* Lessing, very much a man of Enlightenment sensibilities, was a friend and champion of Moses Mendelssohn, who is deemed to be the inaugurator of modern Jewish thought. The noble characteristics of Nathan were intended to reflect those of Mendelssohn. Markedly, all the characters save one are good, gentle, generous souls; and the three religions involved are served by a shining example respectively: the Jew Nathan of the title, who is teller of the parable; the Muslim Saladin, to whom the parable is told; and the Christian, the Knight Templar. The only wicked character is the Christian Patriarch, betokening Lessing's bitter quarrel with an intolerant branch of Christendom, and who is probably a caricature of Lessing's enemy in the Church, Melchior Goeze, the pastor of Hamburg, a fanatic zealot. Whereas Goeze features in the play, Lessing had for several decades before encountering him been planning one day to write his own version of the parable of the rings.

Neither in detail nor in import, but only in skeletal plot form does Lessing's version echo Boccaccio's. In Lessing's, Saladin's treasury is empty not from the costs of religious warfare, but from the monarch's beneficence. Saladin decides to force Nathan, but by the persuasion of reason alone, to have no option but to open his coffers to him. Saladin, seeing it as a watertight trap, puts the question to Nathan: Which of the three religions is the true one?

The bare outline of the answer, that is to say the parable, is that a father had three sons he loved equally, and he wished to pass his inheritance on to each of them. There was a ring which, through many generations, had been given from father to favored son as the symbol of inheritance. In Boccaccio's rendering, the ring means simply that, but, as we shall see, with Lessing, the meaning is expanded. Unable to choose among the three sons, the father has two identical rings crafted by such a skilled artisan that they could not be told apart. On his deathbed, the father gives to each son, unbeknownst to the others, one of the rings. The subsequent argument ensuing after the father passes away as to which son

possesses the true ring is brought before a Judge, who offers a provisional solution. The genuine ring had the property of a kind of charm whereby the bearer could be recognized by being most beloved by both God and fellowman. None of the three sons were showing anything of the like, and the Judge calls them on this, pronouncing:

> ...—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.[1]

Then, several lines later, the Judge utters the words for which Lessing has been repeatedly praised and admired, the words of religious tolerance par excellence:

> 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 the 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 rings you wear;
> And to the 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—[ii]

Nathan then of course tells Saladin that he can no more tell which religion is the true one than can the Judge in the story. At the same time, however, it seems we have not merely a statement of ignorance, but an enhanced statement that each of the three is equally, potentially, the true way, the truth, depending on the living out of the injunction to love one's neighbor. Ultimately, then, the particular religion does not count, and though there is dissension now, all will end well.

Rosenzweig's Response to Lessing

Not to the aesthetic success of the drama, but it is to these blurring aspects of Lessing's tolerance that Rosenzweig takes especial exception, that is to say that in Lessing's dramatic poetry, he "endeavoured to prove that the soul of man, and not his environment, represents all that is great and noble."[iii] To begin with, Rosenzweig notes: "Out of serious problems there is no way out, only a through." That which surmounts "mere tolerance," he observes, is "the indifference through the bloody demand of the 'thousand thousand' years."[iv] Lessing's drama moves rapidly from this Act 4 into Act 5, with the discovery of the sibling relationship between the Knight Templar and Nathan's adopted daughter Recha, as well as the mixture of Muslim and Christian lineage in the Knight Templar, comprising a dramatic turn that Rosenzweig calls "anemic." This he relates in part to Mendelssohn's own fate in his progeny: all were baptized. To Rosenzweig, the "friendship of Lessing and Mendelssohn was too messianic."[v] We live, Rosenzweig insists, in Act 4: "The thousand thousand years are not yet over."[vi] We do not live as human beings bereft of our religious institutions; and, to Nathan's question, "Are Christian and Jew sooner Christian and Jew than human being?" Rosenzweig responds that certainly such a question has its right, and no, the "human being is not Judaism, Christianity," which was the erroneous medieval view and the

view upon which it had to collapse and upon which the "purely human" had to enter. Rosenzweig writes: "The institutions had to stop being brides of God. They had to become houses for the children of God, the human beings. The human being [is] more than his house. But not the unhoused one. Not the 'pure,' that is, the naked human being, the one who is cut loose, the cut flower in the vase. Rather only the housed one."[vii] And so Rosenzweig's answer to Nathan's question is tied to the moment: "And now you see," Rosenzweig asserts, "what the moment in which we live must answer to Nathan's question: Christian and Jew are not sooner Christian and Jew than human being, but rather a Christian and a Jewish human being are more than a naked human being and a naked institution. ... No, the institution may only be the house for us, we must know it and make it come true that we are more than the institution, living Jewish human beings."[viii]

Abulafia's Version of the Parable

In order to take into consideration Rosenzweig's insistence on difference as opposed to the overhasty leap to the pure oneness of human beings, we shall move through certain Jewish mystical views; but first, we need to tell the parable as it is told in the hands of the kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, who seems to be on the other side of tolerance, including an intolerance with regard to Judaism. In many versions, a jewel is set in the ring; and in Abulafia's rendering it is the jewel alone that is to be given, or rather, a pearl. But, as we shall see, this is not the only difference. The core of the parable is brief, and Abulafia opens by arguing that no one disputes the fact that the Jewish people "were the first to receive the Torah from God," and yet the nations have devalued the threefold virtue of the exalting the truth of original scripture, the exalting of its holy language and the exalting of its alphabet, and claim themselves to be the true heirs of divine revelation. Abulafia writes:

> Today, the [Hebrew] Scripture lacks those three virtues, but this is not because it has been exchanged for another. Rather, the matter resembles that of a man who had a beautiful pearl which he wanted to give as an inheritance to his son. While he was instructing his son in

> the matter of wealth, so that the son would recognize the virtue of the pearl, and would value it in the same way, the son came to anger his father. What did the father do? He did not want to give the pearl to another man, for if the son would repent and please his father, he [the son], would lose his inheritance. Rather, the father cast the pearl into a pit, for he said, "If my son does not repent, I do not want him to lose it. While he does not repent, the pearl will remain hidden in the pit. When he repents, I will immediately take it from there, and give it to him." All the while that the son did not repent, the servants of his father used to come to him [the son] and trouble him. Everyone would boast that his lord had given him the pearl, but the son did not pay any attention to them, because he had no intelligence. After a while, they so aggrieved him that he repented, and his father forgave him [the son] and brought the pearl out of the pit and gave it to him. The servants had to exert themselves and offer many words of apology. This has happened to us in the matter of those who say that God has taken them in exchange for us, for all the while that we do not make peace with God, as we have sinned. We have no mouth to answer them. However, when we will repent, and He will return our captivity, those who shame us now will be ashamed before us when they see that God has returned our captivity. They will see that their thought and image were figments of the imagination, and that we have been afflicted for our sins, but all have been absolved. As of today we have not attained that exalted degree to which we expect to rise at any time. For this reason, the disputation continues about who is beloved of God and who has the truth, we or our enemies. This will persist until that Judge will come and take the pearl out of the pit and give it to His chosen, to us or to them.[ix]

Worthiness of receipt, here, too, is a matter of merit; but it is a different kind of waiting for the truth: rather than the pearl being given to several, it is given to none; and at the same time withheld from only one—the intended one. Abulafia's argument is from the past, as eternally true. Here, we know the rightful owner, though that eventual recipient does not yet have the right to receive it. In a sense, the "pearl" or Torah, has been received, but not fully given, in the sense of being fully disclosed or revealed. The hiding away of the pearl figuratively depicts the notion of the "hidden" God. Abulafia ends the parable with expressions of ultimate peace among men, and, emphatically, of the knowledge of God that will fill the earth. "Since the matter is so," he concludes, "all agree for all time that the chosen language is the holy tongue [Hebrew]."

Interestingly, Abulafia's stress is on language, and it is rabbinically and mystically held that perfect understanding or translation of the Bible will be God's name. Thus, implicit in the parable is the problem (or mystery) of monotheism, involving a complicated question concerning non-truth or un-truth, the problem of time, of the between, of multiplicity, of the dichotomy or opposition between pure and impure. If all begins and ends with oneness, then what of the between? As Elliot R. Wolfson formulates it, "If God is truly one, what other side is there?"[x]

Kabbalistic Oppositions

As is apparent in Abulafia's version, the kabbalists wrestled with the notion of one-truth, one-God, and the path of reaching this truth, which they see as connected somehow with language. In many of Wolfson's studies, he delineates the kabbalistically imagined division within the one God. In one study, the focus is on the few kabbalists who dared to concern themselves with the suffering of God himself;[xi] among these is Abulafia, and God's suffering is certainly suggested by the character of the man who owns the pearl, with hints of the need of his own redemption equally as much as the need for human or worldly redemption. For the kabbalists, the Godhead is seen as the root and condition for dualities, the demonic and the holy: thus Wolfson states "the Godhead itself is divided into polar opposites, the left side of judgment (valenced as female) and the right side of mercy (valenced as male). The unity of God is experienced and expressed as the mediation or balance of these two sides."[xii] The theurgical path which seeks to unify the masculine and feminine aspects constitutes not imagining God in the pre-creation condition of being (this would demolish the world, according to the kabbalists), but imagining God in his condition of being at and subsequent to the cut, wound, breakage of the creative act, the moment of differentiation. These two poles within the Godhead need to be distinguished in the social realm as well[xiii] and this is achieved by adhering to the law, with its demarcations of permissible and prohibitive. Yet, in order to draw the divine opposites together so that they become the same (a complex transformation of the feminine into the masculine), the path of the law needs to be repeatedly, strictly followed—

but to do this, to preserve the law, to mark its boundaries, the law needs to be overstepped, or transgressed. Wolfson adduces the principle: "To transgress is to overstep one's boundary, but by stepping over one's boundary one preserves the line that circumscribes the being of one's transgression."[xiv] Thus, the son could not receive the pearl until he takes the path of the law in order for him—and God—to get beyond the law (i.e. beyond oppositions of good and evil).

Wolfson offers the analogy with language: "The issue of the law and its being trespassed is perfectly analogous to the problem of language and its transcendence. The experience of the ineffable marks the limit of human language, but the only way to approach that limit is through language."[xv]

The Jewish mystical "view that the eschatological end is a return to the cosmological beginning"[xvi] is depicted in Abulafia's story of the pearl through what Wolfson characterizes as "a distinctive feature of the mystical phenomenon in the history of religions," that the means of leading out beyond the path of good and evil "necessitates the walking of the path over and over again to find the way out."[xvii]

Wolfson captures this paradox as follows: "What is new is old—the more novel the more ancient. The secret truth of tradition must be discovered, but that dis/covery comes by way of re/covering tradition. This paradox, which figures prominently on the path of kabbalistic thinking, cannot be resolved as a conflict between innovative and conservative approaches, the revolutionary and the traditional."[xviii]

Common to both Lessing and Abulafia is that they cast their imaginations into a future of redemptive peace, Lessing through a cry for tolerance among religions based on a not-knowing of ultimate truth, and Abulafia through an intolerance both of other religions and within Judaism, based on a division within the Godhead itself. And yet both authors reveal and urge the requirement of the expansiveness of poetic imagining, Lessing through antinomianism, Abulafia through hypernomianism, within or alongside traditional, conservative thinking. The parable of the rings and the parable of the pearl demonstrate an imaginative viewing of the gap between cosmological beginning and end.

Notes

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[i] Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise: A Dramatic Poem*, translated from the German by Patrick Maxwell. Introduction by George Alexander Kohut. New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1939 (first edition 1917), pages 251-252.

[ii] Ibid., pages 252-253.

[iii] Ibid., Introduction, page 17.

[iv] *Cultural Writings of Franz Rosenzweig*, edited and translated by Barbara E. Galli. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, page 111.

[v] Ibid., page 109.

[vi] Ibid., page 112.

[vii] Ibid., page 107.

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Translated in Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*. SUNY, 1998, pages 48-49.

[x] Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beyond God and Evil: Hypernomianism, Transmorality, and Kabbalistic Ethics," in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, Chapter 3, pages 103-156. New York, London: Seven Bridges Press, 2002, page 108.

[xi] See "Divine suffering and the hermeneutics of reading: Philosophical reflections on Lurianic mythology," in *Suffering* Religion, edited by Robert Gibbs and Elliot R. Wolfson, pages 101-162. Routlege, 2002.

[xii] "Beyond Good and Evil: Hypernomianism, Transmorality, and Kabbalistic Ethics," in *Crossing Boundaries: Essays on the Ethical Status of Mysticism*, edited by G. William Barnard and Jeffrey J. Kripal, pages 103-156. New York, London: Seven Bridges Press, 2002. Page 104.

[xiii] Ibid., page 106.

[xiv] Ibid., page 127.

[xv] Ibid., page 129.