

# The Parable of the Three Rings

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Which is the true religion? In the Middle Ages, the parable of the three rings, in all its versions, is a subtle answer to this question, which uses a persuasive allegory. The allegory of the three rings refers to a previous allegory, represented by three gems, one real and two fakes. The religion of the philosophers was born from the hidden meaning of the same allegory: universalism, brotherhood of men as children of the one and only God, the transcendence of a single God that cannot be reduced to any particular representation, and love for one's neighbors. The three sons who receive the inheritance of the ring, given by their father, are all loved by him and all three receive a gem that could be the real one. The similarity of the position of the three sons is equivalent to the moral element shared by the three religions: All those who believe in God and his justice put into practice the fundamental teachings of the philosophers. The meaning of the allegory is evident: None of the three sons can claim with certainty the possession of the real ring, but precisely because of this their faith can remain clear, removed from the temptation of pursuing someone because of that person's religion.

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## 1. Introduction

Story LXXIII of the *Novellino* bears the following title: "How the Sultan, Being in Need of Money, Sought to Find Occasion to Proceed against a Jew." The Sultan, being in need of money, was advised to proceed against a rich Jew, who lived in his country, and to try to take away his substance from him. The Sultan sent for this Jew and asked him what was the best religion, thinking: He would say surely, "the Jewish faith," when I would tell him that he sins against mine. And if he said, "the Islamic faith," I would ask him why he was a Jew. The Jew, hearing the question, replied with an anecdote: There was a father who had three sons, and he had a ring with a precious stone, one of the finest in the world. Each of the sons begged this father that he should leave him this ring at his death. The father, seeing that each of them desired it, sent for a good jeweller and said to him, "Master, make me two rings just like this one, and set in each of them a stone resembling this one." The jeweller made the rings so that no one knew the real gem apart, saving the father. He sent for his sons one by one, and to each he gave a ring in secret, and each son believed he had the true ring, and no one knew that the truth saved the father. The Jew concludes his tale thus: And so I tell you of the faiths, which are three. God above knows best of all, and his sons who are ourselves, each of us thinks he has the true one. Then the Sultan, hearing the man get out of the difficulty in this manner, does not know how to entrap him and let him go.<sup>1</sup>

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## 2. Only God Knows Which Religion Is the True One

The Jew's answer is quite cunning. It avoids the obstacle and changes the order of the dialogue. He answers the sultan who asks him which religion is the best with the suggestion that every believer thinks his religion is the best, but only God has the last word, because only God knows which religion is the true one, certainly not the believers of just any faith. The believer is incapable of knowing which faith is the best. He cannot exclude that it is his own, but he can't be sure of it either. The believer may be proud of his religion, but this does not authorise him to consider other faiths as false. Knowledge about religion is only God's, of the only God who is father unto all men. God, our father, wishes to prevent the unfounded conviction of possessing the truth from becoming the reason for and source of persecution and victimisation. The fact that human beings are not allowed knowing which the true faith is, and that at the same time they are believers without reserve in their creed, is to be considered positively and not as the insurmountable contradiction that may appear in the parable of the three rings. Indeed, in this parable, each of the three brothers is convinced of having received the real ring, and this could induce each one of the three to become the oppressor of the other two, and in fact this is what happens in the fable. So, one must take a further step forward from the parable: Each one of the three brothers must accept relative uncertainty regarding his faith and insuperable ignorance with regard to the true faith that instead is exclusive to divine knowledge. The parable per se illustrates God's point of view of him who knows which is the true faith, while each of the brothers thinks that the true faith is his own. In telling the parable, the Jew takes that further step forward by explaining the reasons that justify the permanent doubt regarding the true religion, at the same time without legitimising any response of sceptical relaxation or, even, of abandonment. The Jew adds the point of view of the sons to that of the father, to stay anchored to one's own religion but without disdaining the others; to value and respect the other creeds but without distancing oneself from one's own. It is this delicate balance that the tale teaches us.

The conciliation of the one and the many occurs on two separate levels: that of God and that of men. The ways in which God and man comprehend and approve the unity of the many that does not suppress the many are different. Human knowledge is abysmally removed from the knowledge of God, in the duplicate meaning of the objective and subjective genitive. Man not only must be content with a "learned ignorance" regarding the nature of God, thus transcending any definition and any theological predicate regarding the being of God, but must also forgo the knowledge of any divine plan in the history of the world. Hence, the relative value of any theology and the substantial equivalence of all efforts to conceptualise divines reality. No one creed can aspire to being announced as the only true religion. Every thought of God can only accept to be compared to other thoughts to dialogue with them and listen to them. If God is the only God, the truth is one and is God himself, the multiplicity of faiths and of theological solutions cannot contradict this indisputable unity of the divine. The variety of theological perspectives cannot but confirm, simultaneously, the unity and ineffableness of God. This *coniunctio* (connection) of unity and ineffableness is well expressed by Cusano: "God is above nothingness and above something: nothingness obeys him, in fact, in order to become something." No predicate can be applied to God, but he is not equivalent to nothingness: "He is not nothingness and neither is he not, nor, after all, is he and is he not together, for he is the source and origin of all the principles of being and not-being" (1995).<sup>2</sup> The anteriority of God with respect to any definition, with respect to nothingness and to the very contradiction, reduces any theology to mere conjecture. Any theology is a theophany, a manner of God's revelation that, however, does not allow perceiving his essence. The metaphor of the mirrors, already partially used by the

Pseudo-Dionysius, illustrates how the various minds can participate in the single and inaccessible divine truth. Let us suppose that there is a perfectly flat and flawless mirror that reflects God in his infinity. Let us suppose that, via the first mirror of truth, the same clarity is transmitted to an indefinite number of other mirrors, each one of which reflects the truth in its own way according to the different degree of curvature each one has. The mirrors indirectly receive from the most perfect of mirrors the original clarity that would otherwise be inaccessible. The first mirror of the truth is the word, while the other mirrors are the intellectual natures that grasp God via the Grace or the word, each one in its own way according to its particular nature. Also, they perceive themselves too because in the first mirror their same images are reflected perfectly.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Lessing's *Nathan the Wise*: The Modern Version of the Three Rings Fable

In *Nathan the Wise*, Lessing, inspired by the version of the apologue of the three rings found in the third tale of the first day of the *Decameron*, places in the Templar's mouth words of indignation for the arrogance of the Jews, that arrogance that is "passed from the Christian to the Muslim, that only their God is the true God" (2003).<sup>4</sup> Comprehension and tolerance should not be limited to individuals but should be extended to the creeds as such. Isn't it folly to behave wisely and philanthropically with one single man of a different creed and at the same time to despise the other creeds and persecute their believers? The drama *Nathan the Wise* is the modern version of the three rings fable. Saladin asks Nathan to tell him what the most convincing faith, or law, of all. Saladin, who professes himself a Muslim, openly states his conviction that of the three religions (Jewish, Muslim, and Christian) only one can be the true religion. Nathan asks for a little time to think about it, and then he tells a story. A man had a ring of priceless worth, whose stone, "an opal that shed a hundred colours fair and had a magic power: That he who wore it, trusting its strength, was loved of God and men."<sup>5</sup> He leaves the ring to the son he loves best, providing that in turn the son bequeath the ring to his favourite son; and thus that the dearest son, by virtue of the ring, should be the head of all his house. At last, the ring, passed from son to son, descends to a father of three sons. He loves all three of them equally because all of them are dutiful and respectful. So he promises the ring to each of them, but separately. Close to death, the father calls a jeweller and orders him two more rings identical to the first. The jeweller is so successful that not even the father can distinguish them from the original, so he calls each son by himself and separately gives each one a ring. Once the father is dead, each son claims the right to become the reigning prince. Hence, the quarrels, accusations, and divisions come.

At the end of the story, Nathan excuses himself for not daring to "try to distinguish the rings the father had the jeweller make precisely so that they would become indistinguishable."<sup>6</sup> The three brothers brought their dispute before a judge, each one claiming himself certain that the father could not have tricked him. Now, the judge reminds them: the true ring has the magical power of making the bearer loved and favoured by God and men. This should solve the dispute. However, the judge continues, if the brothers stay silent, which means that they only love themselves and that all three are swindled swindlers. "Most probable, the judge concludes, all there of your rings are fake. Perhaps the real ring was lost, and your father had three copies made to hide its loss and to replace it."<sup>7</sup> In the end, the judge suggests that each son, having received it from the father, should consider his ring the real one. Their father did not wish to humiliate two of them because he loved all three. Hence, they shall have to try to "imitate his incorruptible and unprejudiced love. Each one should compete in demonstrating in the light of day the virtue of the stone of his ring. And he should aid its virtue with gentleness, with unyielding patience and charity, and with profound devotion to God."<sup>8</sup> The new element introduced by

Lessing's version is the fact that not even the father can distinguish the real ring from its copies. This means that, in his eyes, all faiths are equal. Only those who wear these rings, those who profess one of these faiths, can make their own resplendent and wonderful.

#### 4. The Different Versions of the Three Rings Parable

In a famous essay published over 50 years ago, Mario Penna offers a reconstruction of the secular journey of the three rings parable by starting from a conference held by Gaston Paris, in which five versions of the parable preceding Boccaccio's are indicated. Three of them have the form defined by Paris as christian (they are found one in the *Tractatus de diversis materiis praedicabilibus* (*Treaty of the different topics for preaching*) by Stefano di Borbone, the second in the *Dis dou vrai aniel* (*The parable of the real ring*), and the third in the *Gesta Romanorum* (*The enterprises of the Romans*), respectively. The form that Gaston Paris calls skeptic corresponds instead to the versions found in the *Novellino* and in the *Venturoso siciliano* (*The lucky Sicilian*) (as well as in the *Decameron*).<sup>9</sup> According to Paris, all of these version have a single source, namely the Hebrew version found in the *Scévet Jehudà* (*Shevet Yehudah: Scepter of Judah*), a Hebrew chronicle written by Solomon Ibn Verga at the end of the 15th century, based on material that naturally dates back to a period prior to that in which the five versions mentioned above appeared. This theory is only partially shared by Penna: the version that we find in Boccaccio is certainly of Jewish origin, but the version found in the *Scévet* cannot be considered the purest and the most ancient. The version in the *Scévet*, Penna observes, is instead the one farthest from the original, and he thinks he can prove it.

In an episode told by Solomon, Don Pedro IV of Aragon asked a Jewish wise man, Ephraim Ben Sancho, that which was the true religion. After taking time to think, the wise man, asked to provide the answer, told the king of a personal experience: "A month ago, my neighbour left on a long journey and to console them left each of his two sons an expensive gem. The two brothers came to me to judge which of the gems is more valuable and the distinction between the two. I told them that their father was the best judge as he was a great expert in the value and shape of precious stones, what is called a lapidary, and that they should turn to him to learn the truth. When I told them this, they beat and insulted me." "As you have been mistreated without reason, said the king, they deserve to be punished." "And then the wise man said: May your ears, my king, hear the words that your mouth has spoken. Thus Esau and Jacob were brothers and each one received a precious gem, and my lord asks which is the most valued. May our king send a messenger to our father in Heaven, as he is the great lapidary and he shall show the difference between the two gems."<sup>10</sup> As Penna observes, the king could have replied anyhow that the wise man had not answered the question about which religion he thought to be the true one. The question asked was not of a generic kind, but particular and regarded the religion that the Jew believed was preferable.

#### 5. The Original Allegory of the Three Gems

The allegory of the three rings contains a more remote allegory, in which the three faiths are allegorically represented by three gems, one real and two fakes. According to Penna, this second allegory is the starting point for the research on the three rings parable. The use of the three gems allegory takes on special significance in the Middle Ages and defines the hidden meaning of the three rings parable. The allegory is justified with respect to its didactic function starting from the sensitive elements of the outside world. The concept that defines the sensitive forms as signs of a script that must speak to the spirits the language of God is of

Neoplatonic origin and may possibly have entered medieval culture thanks to Jewish mediation.<sup>11</sup> Reference to a precious gem is found already in the Gospel. In one of the Middle Ages' most well-known and disseminated oriental legends, *Barlaam and Josaphat*, the gem allegory is used to represent religion. Barlaam uses a stratagem to meet prince Josaphat. He presents himself dressed as a merchant and states he has on him a precious stone capable of all virtues: It restores sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, voice to the dumb, heals the sick, provides knowledge to the ignorant, keeps demons away, and brings all good things to its holder. Josaphat's guardian answers that he has never heard of such a gem with so many virtues and asks the fake merchant to show it to him—but Barlaam answers that those who do not have healthy eyes and a pure heart cannot look unto this gem because they would lose the little light they have, and that it is precisely because he has heard of Josaphat's purity of heart that he has brought it to him and not to others.

Obviously, once led before Josaphat, the young prince asks him to see the gem, and the old hermit, after telling him various parables intended to demonstrate that the true assets are spiritual and not mundane, because only the former can lead to eternal salvation, then reveals his own religion, and Josaphat understands that the precious stone is that faith that can lead to salvation."<sup>12</sup>

## 6. The Meaning of the Gem as True Religion

Numerous elements seem to confirm the fact that in the course of the Middle Ages, the image of the precious stone used to signify religion is familiar to everyone. The choice of the precious stone to signify religion may have been suggested by the properties typical of gems—hardness, incombustibility and cohesion—while their capacity to reflect and hold light within them confirms the opinion that these stones are superior bodies especially suited for holding the celestial virtues to which other bodies are refractory.<sup>13</sup> The gem therefore represented revelation: “To identify the precious stone with religion meant to designate the natural instrument of salvation, the path traced by the Lord to reach heaven, that sign of God on earth that consists in the doctrine and in the law that he has dictated, with that fragment of matter on which heaven converges with its virtue to transmit to earth a spark of its power.”<sup>14</sup> Now, the ring is the most common way of carrying a precious stone. In one of the most famous works of medieval lapidary, the *Liber de gemmis* (*Book Concerning the Gems*) by Marbode, Bishop of Rennes, one reads that the ring is discovered by Prometheus. A precious stone, a ring, in Barlaam's legend represents the true faith revealed by God. Mankind's malice and its inclination towards fraud have produced other stones and other rings that are not precious, just fakes. These represent the false religions that do not stem from the revelation of God but from the deceit of men. Human beings live in uncertainty—*versa falsis labor est discernere gemmas* (*The Task of Distinguishing the Real from the Fake Gems*), Marbode states—because on the one side is the true faith, the gem that holds all of the virtues, and on the other, the fake stones only appear to have those virtues. In the end, however, ultimately we are given the chance to distinguish what is true from what is false. According to Penna, this would be the simplest form of the parable, which seems to be the most ancient: “Since, if the stone is truly virtuous, uncertainty can be possible in given conditions but it can't last for long. For uncertainty to last, one must either remove the virtue from the stone, as Boccaccio does, or leave it in the shadows, as the *Scévet* does—one version is realistic and the other is malicious: both taste more of the Renaissance than of the Middle Ages” (1952).<sup>15</sup>

Penna considers a version of the parable written in the mid-13th century as simpler and prior to those in the *Scévet* and in the *Decameron*. In this version, the stone is what it represents for Marbode and in general for the Medieval man: a virtuous body or, at least, a body that truly can become virtuous because it is suitable for

attracting the astral virtue and therefore receive it without mediation from God himself. “A rich man possessed a ring in which was set a precious stone that had the virtue of healing any disease. He had a wife who gave him a legitimate daughter but who, later on, was seduced by pimps and gave birth to other daughters who were passed off as her husband’s. The rich man knew how things really stood, and on his death bed, he made his will by which he declared he was leaving his ring to his legitimate daughter, and that the inheritance should go to her who possessed that ring. He then called his daughter to him and gave her the ring. When the other daughters came to know about this, they had copies made of the ring. When the will was brought before the judge, each one showed her ring and claimed to be the legitimate daughter. The judge was a wise man, however, and put the virtue of the rings to test. When he saw that no virtue came from the others, he declared legitimate the daughter whose ring had shown its virtue, and declared the others illegitimate” (1952).<sup>16</sup>

Here we find no ambiguity, no similarity that makes it impossible to distinguish the original ring from its copies, unlike what happens in the later versions in Boccaccio and in the *Novellino*. In this version, the authentic gem is that of Barlaam, the stone that allows the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the dumb to speak, and gives knowledge to the fools. Barlaam’s true stone represents the true faith, while the fake stones represent the faiths that are not the true one. The distinction between the true faith on the one side and the false faiths on the other is objective and verifiable, and is not founded on points of view or on interpretations. Another noteworthy fact is that in this version the fake stones are made by the children, not by the father like in the Italian sceptic versions. This means that the false religions are not made by God but by men. The three fundamental and constantly disputing creeds of the Middle Ages are the Jewish, the Christian, and the Islamic. In this version, which represents the concept of an intransigent Christianity that places revelation before religion, the idea that the false religions are the work of God is unacceptable. Penna mentions an intermediate version of the parable in which, in order to prevent the miraculous ring from falling into the hands of the wicked sons, the father has two identical copies made of it and then calls his sons separately, giving the two copies to the two wicked older sons and the real one to the good one. The father also tells the good one about how he tricked the other two into thinking each one had the real ring. In this version, the fact that the falsification is done by the father and not by his children generates some ambiguity that has several consequences on later versions of the parable. Another thing that changes also is how wickedness is considered. Initially it is seen to have a religious-confessional matrix and deemed tantamount to idolatry (i.e., adoration of a false God), while in the intermediate version the wickedness consists in being wicked and the consequence of wickedness is the blindness of faith: “The father falsifies the rings, as God himself hides from the eyes of the wicked man—who is such not because he breaks a religious law but because he subtracts himself from the natural law.”<sup>17</sup> Penna underscores the crucial role played by the assignment of the role of falsifier to the father rather than to the sons, since this change would seem to determine an initial ambiguity that would then become “definitive simply by taking away from the stone its healing properties, so as to remove any chance of establishing the genuineness of the gem. We will find that this step has already been taken in the subsequent version, which of the *Novellino*, granted that, as is most probable, the *Novellino* truly dates back to the end of the 13th century” (1952).<sup>18</sup>

## 7. The Disappearance of the Precious Stone: From Apologia to Tolerance

The versions that Penna calls “non-confessional”—those that Gaston Paris calls sceptic—are, in addition to that of the *Scévet*, that of the *Novellino* (from which this short essay stems), that of the *Venturoso Ciciliano*, and that of the *Decameron*. According to the chronological data mentioned by Penna, the *Novellino* contains the

version that is the first to undergo the substantial change that radically modifies its character, transforming it from an apologetic tool into an explicit and subtle argument in favour of religious tolerance. The change consists in a mere omission: By omitting the stone's extraordinary properties, the meaning of the parable is turned upside down.

If until then the story's narrative advancement had been absolutely simple and linear, proceeding first via the natural germination of details around an initial core consisting simply of the precious stone allegory—and then via non-essential changes of the story—now, all of a sudden, we find in the new version a new procedure, a deviation that takes us not only towards other meanings and other theses, but most importantly towards another dialectic method that is the clear product of refined intellectual maturity.<sup>19</sup> (Penna 1952, 71)

In the parable's new version, the falsification stems from the father (we have already commented on the importance of this shift of the falsification initiative from the sons to the father in order to generate a radical transformation of the key meaning of the entire parable) and the gem has virtually disappeared because it has lost its healing properties. This justifies the permanence of uncertainty and the impossibility of finding a solution on earth. Only the father knows which is the true faith and has no intention of allowing his sons to acquire this knowledge, thus leaving each son with the illusion of having the real one. The next step, in the direction of illuminist rationalism, consists in the sons becoming aware of the impossibility of defining the true religion without sceptically abandoning their own original religion or losing their faith. In the prototype of the new version, the gem allegory has disappeared. We no longer have any gem with special and objectively certifiable properties—virtues transmitted to the stone by astral influences. The certification of the healing properties of the gem could be obtained only via miracles, which however could be denied as a proof. The sceptic could have posed the question: Where are the blind that see the deaf that hear and the dumb that speak?<sup>20</sup>

## **8. Conclusion: The Religion of the Philosophers and the Need for Different Religions**

Gaston Paris states that the new version of the parable was born in Spain by the hands of the Jews, and it could be that the purpose for which it was drafted was to raise polemics. This version spreads widely in the Christian milieu in Italy, where we find it repeated three times in a period of 50 years.<sup>21</sup> The religion of the philosophers is the common element that justifies the statement of ignorance regarding the true religion. After all, throughout its history, humanity has often found itself faced with the need to choose between the uncontrolled violence of religious persecution and the political/ideological justification of cultural pluralism and of religious tolerance. Aspects that are shared by the religion of the philosophers and the non-confessional version of the parable are: universalism, brotherhood of men as children of the one and only God, the transcendence of a single God that cannot be reduced to any particular representation, and love for one's neighbours. Noticing along with Penna that, in the edifying versions, the good son is countered with other wicked sons, while in the new version this distinction has disappeared and, in fact, Boccaccio warns the reader that the sons are all virtuous and quite obedient to their father:

This virtue shared by the three sons is what drives the father to falsify the gem, so that the falsification that in the confessional versions played a malicious or punitive role here is turned into an action of love by which, since only one can have the real gem, the aim is to leave the others at least with the great comfort of an illusion that cannot give rise to a disappointment—namely an illusion quite close to reality.<sup>22</sup> (Penna 1952, 101-2)

The three sons who receive the inheritance of the ring are all loved by their common father and all three receive a gem that could be the real one. The similarity of the position of the three sons is equivalent to the moral element shared by the three religions: All those who believe in God and his justice put into practice the fundamental teachings of the philosophers and may therefore achieve, through their consequential actions, a certain degree of salvation. The monarch is interested only in this common moral element, since state government does not at all require the solution of the theological problem regarding the divine origin of this moral—the government of the state does not need to establish which the true God is. Conversely, if the prince decides which the true religion is, he immediately takes on direct responsibility for the ensuing persecution of non-believers and their banishment as sources of contamination.

The non-confessional version therefore reveals itself as bearer of a message that is anything but sceptical, since it explains in the most convincing manner the reason that makes indisputable the right of tolerance of the three religions and, by analogy, of all world religions. Through its allegorical language, in fact, the parable states that all three rings come from the common father and are destined to sons who are all equally good. Only one, however, is the real one, while the other two are imitations. Hence, the indisputable right of the existence of different religions pairs up with an exaltation of the meaning of the revelation, related to the special emphasis on the concept of transcendence: The impossibility of identifying the original ring is nothing but the reaffirmation of the infinite distance that separates human beings from the only reality that transcends any revelation—a distance that makes it impossible for man to take any “blasphemous” decision regarding the nature of God and his will. At the same time, by stating that only one of the three rings is the real one, the parable suggests that the religion of the philosophers is neither exhaustive nor sufficient in terms of human life in its entirety. Above and beyond natural religion—i.e., the religion of reason—there must be a superior religious dimension that is realized through the acceptance of a revelation, of a faith as the gift of the father to his children, regarding which no earthly authority or institution can have a say. The father shall consider as his children even those who do not possess the real gem, the real ring. In actual facts, none of the three sons can claim with certainty the possession of the real ring, but precisely because of this their faith can remain clear, removed from the temptation of pursuing someone because of that person’s religion or of pursuing one’s own pursuers led astray by the same kind of blindness.

## Notes

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1. Free translation from *Il Novellino (Le cento novelle antike)*, introduction by Giorgio Manganelli, BUR, Milan 4 (1999): 83-84.
  2. Free translation from Niccolò Cusano, *De Deo abscondito*, in Cusano, *Il Dio nascosto (The Hidden God)*, edited by L. Mannarino, Laterza, Rome-Bari 1995, 7-8.
  3. Niccolò Cusano, *De filiatione dei (On the Divine Descendance)*, Cusano, *Il Dio nascosto (The Hidden God)*, 46-48.
  4. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*; free translation into English from the Italian version *Nathan ilsaggio*, edited by A. Casalegno, introduction by E. Bonfatti, with original text on facing pages, Garzanti Milan, 8 (2003): 105.
  5. *Ivi*, 155.
  6. *Ivi*, 157.
  7. *Ivi*, 161.
  8. *Ivi*, 163.
  9. M. Penna, *La parabola dei tre anelli e la tolleranza nel Medioevo (The Parable of the Three Rings and Tolerance in the Middle Ages)*, ed. Gheroni Turin, 1952, 10.
  10. *Ivi*, 14-15.
  11. *Ivi*, 31.



12. *Ivi*, 36.
13. *Ivi*, 47.
14. *Ivi*, 49.
15. *Ivi*, 53.
16. *Ivi*, 54.
17. *Ivi*, 61.
18. *Ivi*, 61-62.
19. *Ivi*, 71.
20. *Ivi*, 80-81.
21. *Ivi*, 83.
22. *Ivi*, 101-2.