For no joy in the world can compare to the resolution of doubts[[1]](#footnote-2)

**On the Certainty of Tradition: Maimonides versus Ibn Daud**

OR

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*And one sage has written: he who has never savored the taste of resolving intellectual doubts, has never savored the taste of joy.*

*Rema, Torat ha-Ola, 1:6*

The public nature of the theophany at Sinai, along with the transmission over generations of the account of its occurrence, has been regarded by many as clear proof that the Pentateuch/Torah was truly given by God. The proof is based on two arguments: 1) that the revelation at Sinai is unique, being the only revelation in human history comprised of concrete visual and auditory elements observed by a large number of people; 2) that the tradition attesting to this event has been passed down uninterrupted for generations.[[2]](#footnote-3) In his *Guide of the Perplexed* (2:40), Maimonides eschews this argument and proposes a different approach for demonstrating that the Pentateuch/Torah is the one and only divine law:

If [...] you find a Law all of whose ordinances are due to the attention being paid [...] to the soundness of the circumstances pertaining to the body and also to the soundness of the belief […] and that desire to make man wise [...] you must know that the Law comes from Him [...] and that this Law is divine.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Maimonides’ criteria for considering a religion divine is that it play the role a divine religion ought to play – that is, it must provide everything necessary for the establishment of a fully-functioning society and must guide the individual toward the attainment of intellectual perfection. A religion which fulfills these criteria should be considered divine.[[4]](#footnote-5) Long chapters of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (3:26–49) are dedicated to demonstrating that Judaism is precisely such a religion, portraying the Pentateuch/Torah as a book which meets these criteria. This is as opposed to the teachings of Judaism’s two competing religions Christianity and Islam: Christianity is not monotheistic, and thus fails to lead man to intellectual perfection; Islam was founded by a man (Muhammad) who, being subject to his sensual impulses, could not have been a true prophet, and is thus an act of plagiarism.[[5]](#footnote-6),[[6]](#footnote-7)

Maimonides’ decision not to base the authenticity of Judaism on the nation’s tradition and heritage would seem to be due to his adoption of the principles of Aristotelian philosophy and the universalistic aspirations it entails. However, as will be demonstrated in the ensuing discussion, Maimonides’ Aristotelian predecessor, active just a few years before him, made precisely such an argument. We are referring to R. Abraham Ibn Daud (1110 Cordoba–1180 Toledo) author of *The Exalted Faith*[[7]](#footnote-8)and *The Book of Tradition*.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Ibn Daud and Maimonides seem to have shared much in common. Both sought to reconcile Aristotelian philosophy with the religious beliefs entailed by the tradition of divine revelation. Both faced (to differing degrees) the same polemical challenges to the Torah’s authenticity and exclusivity, whether the written Torah or the Oral one. Both defended the rabbinic oral tradition against the Karaites who saw it as nothing but a forgery, and both sought to establish the authenticity of the Pentateuch in the face of the alternatives offered by believers in the Quran and the New Testament.

It goes without saying that a philosopher’s approach to the status of religious tradition bears important consequences for determining the status of rabbinic Judaism vis-à-vis competing traditions or the challenges of Aristotelian philosophy. This naturally elicits the following question: from where did these two philosophers derive their divergent ideas of religious tradition? While both seem loyal, philosophically speaking, to Aristotelianism, they nevertheless take very different approaches. If we wish to be more precise, the question can be broken down into two: 1) does religious tradition have any epistemological status in Aristotelian thought? 2) and if so, why did Maimonides resort to a different criterion for determining a religion’s divinity?

In addressing this question, we must note that *maqbūlāt* (“traditions”; in Hebrew *mequbalot*) play a well-defined role in medieval Aristotelian epistemology and logic. As we will see below, such “traditions” can include, among other things, the traditions of revealed religions. The category of “traditions”, thus can play a central role in religious defenses and polemics, and it is reasonable to assume that a theologian loyal to Aristotelianism will discuss their level of certainty alongside other sources of knowledge.

As we will explain, the status of “traditions” in Aristotelianism is relatively complex. They generally derive from information attained through sense perception (which is only epistemologically applicable to those present at a given time or place). However, the category does not only apply to information which can be expressed in declarative sentences (such information can often be attained from other sources of knowledge, intelligibles, for example). It can also apply to information expressed in the form of an imperative sentence, a call to action based on religious authority. In such cases “traditions” stand alongside, or supplant, so called *mefursamot* (Arabic: *mashhūrāt*), that is, societal conventions.

**“Traditions” as a source of knowledge**

In his philosophical work *The Exalted Faith*,[[9]](#footnote-10) Ibn Daud dedicates a “*kelal – petiḥah*” (introduction)[[10]](#footnote-11) to “traditions and an explanation of their great value”:[[11]](#footnote-12)

[The sources of] human knowledge [are divided] into intelligibles and perceptions. Some perceptions are what a man himself observes; others are not. [In this latter case] someone else has already observed [the information], reported it, and introduced them to him whether this be [from] a group or an individual.

Ibn Daud relies on two of humanity’s epistemological tools: the intellect and the senses. Sense perception can be divided into two categories: immediate apprehension via sense experience and indirect apprehension attained from the report of another. This latter indirect information, that is “traditions,” may be attained from one person who has personally experienced an event or from many. Since such “traditions” are indirect, Ibn Daud must address the question of their credibility:

[The listener’s own] view may rely either upon them [=the transmitters of information] or him to such a great extent that he will not try to reject or doubt the statement. Rather [the listener] will consider the grade/value [of the report] as if he himself [was present] and saw it [himself]. [On the other hand, sometimes] he may not rely on [what was reported]. Consequently, there are “traditions” that are accepted by some people and rejected by others. The fool thinks that this [difference] is a weakness in the “traditions” [themselves] [...] [The fact that] people differ over [the veracity] of “traditions” does not necessarily mean that they are, in themselves, doubtful. On the contrary, sometimes in and of themselves they are true, even though the way by which they reach us may be faulty.

According to Ibn Daud, the doubt which may attend a “tradition” is not an objective fault, i.e., it does not depend on the quality of the “traditions” themselves but rather on the quality of its transmitters and receivers. If the receiver of a “tradition” considers the transmitter trustworthy, then the “traditions” will be deemed worthy as well. The receiver may even go so far as to accord such “traditions” the credibility afforded to perceptions, that is, information obtained from direct experience. By contrast, if the source of information is not, in the receiver’s estimation, sufficiently reliable, then the “traditions” he transmits will be doubted.

Besides the independent credibility of a source or multiple sources of information, the certainty of “traditions” depends on an additional factor:

There is doubt [about a “tradition”] mostly when we receive it [as] the report of one individual. But when it comes to us from the multitude of the nation you should not say that [the “traditions”] reached [the multitude]. Rather, [you should say] that all of them heard the “tradition,” so that when there were six hundred thousand or more prophets on a single day, [then] the only doubt that could remain [about the veracity of the “tradition”] would be if someone would say that this report is a story composed by an author, but which never truly took place.

Here Ibn Daud presents a more objective criterion for determining the credibility of a “tradition”: the number witnesses. A single source of information raises doubts. However, such doubts will be dispelled the moment the information is attested to by many people, a point already argued by Saadia Gaon.[[12]](#footnote-13) Ibn Daud’s argument for the certainty of the theophany at Sinai is clear: it is a testimony of an event transmitted by the masses – “six hundred thousand or more!” Ibn Daud even refers to them all as “prophets,” thus establishing their credibility and ensuring that “no doubt remains” about the “traditions” they transmit.

One refutation is possible though. It could be argued that the account of many, high-quality witnesses could nevertheless be a fiction, “a story composed by an author.” (2:5, abstract). Ibn Daud’s solution to this problem is essentially aimed at the criticism leveled by Muslims against the Pentateuch: they argue that it was lost in the travails of the Babylonian exile and later reconstructed by the Ezra the scribe.[[13]](#footnote-14) Ibn Daud’s responds to this claim as follows:

Let us assume [...] that after seventy years Ezra came from Babylonia and wrote the altered Torah [...] [how could it be the case that people] both far and near, from the mountains of Mesopotamia and Persia, as well as the [people] who remained in the Land of Israel and [the people] who journeyed to Egypt and Africa, agreed to hearken to it without dispute and protest? (*The Exalted Faith* 5:2, 5).

Ibn Daud further argues that a well-publicized event, such as the theophany of Sinai, is certainly not a contrived story:

 [The doubter] would be able to say that the author composed this story on the basis of what someone [else] testified, [arguing that] perhaps he [...] did not tell the truth [...] However, the encounter [lit. discourse] face to face with the wonders, that [also] are generally acknowledged [*ha-mefursamim*] acquires veracity. For to claim that the book is false at its very source, is inconceivable. [On the contrary,] it is a book which an honest multitude copied from an honest multitude [...] The prophet informed the nation by making more than a million of them prophets who heard the voice of God on a single day [...] (5:2, 5).

In the case of the revelation at Sinai, the credibility afforded by the number (“millions”) and reliability (“prophets”) of the witnesses is compounded by the fulfillment of an additional condition, serving as additional assurance of the complete certainty of the information transmitted, despite the numerous years which have passed since the event transpired: “it is a book which an honest multitude copied from an honest multitude.” Due to its fulfillment of this condition, the “tradition” gains a new status, that of “continuous information.”

Know that the difference between continuous information [*tekufim*] and “traditions” [*mequbalim*] is [that while] it is possible to entertain doubt about a “tradition,” it is not possible to entertain a doubt about “continuous information.” The wonders performed by the prophet, [Moses], which he spoke to the multitude of his people face to face [...] and no one after him has denied them –– are, therefore, like continuous information. And continuous information are properly premises/propositions in a true demonstrative syllogism [...] (Ibid.)

The veracity of the miracles performed by Moses is beyond doubt as the information is “continuous,” having passed the test of time “and no one after him has denied it.” Such “continuous information” can, therefore, be used as a proposition in a demonstrative syllogism.

It should be noted that this approach is fundamentally different from modern logic which only provides a formal definition of a valid argument: that is, one in which the conclusion follows necessarily from its premises. Alongside a valid argument, modern logic also discusses a sound argument which must be both formally valid and built upon true premises/propositions. By contrast, as we will show below, medieval logic is more stringent: a demonstrative syllogism requires not only that its premises be true, but also that they be certain.

In Ibn Daud’s opinion, continuous information – unlike “traditions” but like sense perceptions and intelligibles – can function as a premise in a demonstrative syllogism:

We know from the view of the logicians that the [conclusions of] the above uninterrupted “traditions” enter into true demonstration [Logicians make this claim even] though they are the most stringent people in the world when it comes to scrutinizing discourse [...] [for example,] they can offer no way for a man to deny that [the countries] Egypt and Babylon exist, since the report about this [fact] is so regular [*takuf*] that it is as if were attained from a perception; both the person who has seen [these places] and the person who has not, must believe in [the truth of] this [claim]. (*The Exalted Faith*, 5:2, 5)[[14]](#footnote-15)

These three sources of knowledge intelligibles, traditions, and perceptions are also deemed by Maimonides to be reliable, as he explains in his “Epistle on Astrology”:

It is not proper for a man to accept as trustworthy anything other than one of these three things. The first is a thing for which there is a clear proof deriving from man’s reasoning. [...] The second is a thing that a man perceives through one of the five senses – such as when he knows with certainty that this is red, and this is black and the like through the sight of his eye. [...] The third is something received from the prophets or from the righteous.

Every reasonable man ought to distinguish in his mind and thought all the things that he accepts as trustworthy and say: “This I accept as trustworthy because of tradition, and this because of sense-perception, and this on grounds of reason.” Anyone who accepts as trustworthy anything that is not of these three categories, of him it is said: “The simple believes everything” (Prov. 14:15).[[15]](#footnote-16)

Unlike Ibn Daud, Maimonides accords “traditions” (“a thing that a man receives”) an independent epistemological status and does not specifically associate them with perceptions. Unlike the other two sources of knowledge, a “tradition” is considered demonstrated, and its credibility derives from the authority of its source: in the past, the prophets (“peace be upon them”), and today the righteous, who are reliable by virtue of their character. Maimonides instructs the reader to distinguish between two categories: these three credible sources of knowledge, on one hand; and information derived from other sources which he regards as unreliable, on the other. By process of elimination we can conclude that anything “that a man receives” from someone who is *not* “the prophets” or “the righteous” does not deserve our full credulity. This argument contributes to the primary goal of Maimonides’ epistle: to argue that one should not rely on the extensive astrological literature of the era (amounting to “thousands of books”), because the authors of such works are not “prophets or the righteous.”

Non-credible sources of knowledge aside, is there any distinction or hierarchy between these three credible sources, according to Maimonides? It would seem that there is. Elsewhere, in his discussion of a prophet who works miracles but preaches idolatry, Maimonides emphasizes the superiority of intelligibles over perceptions: “for the testimony of the intellect, which invalidates his argument, is stronger than the testimony of the eye that beholds his miracle” (Introduction to *Commentary on the Mishnah* 1). Maimonides also discusses these epistemological categories in Chapter 8 of his *Treatise on Logic*:[[16]](#footnote-17) There he lists two groups of propositions: the first group is comprised of those propositions “which are known to be true and require no proof for their truthfulness.” This group includes four categories: perceptions, primary intelligibles,[[17]](#footnote-18) conventions and traditions. The second group is comprised of certain (in Arabic: *yaqīn*) propositions. According to Maimonides, these are the only propositions which can be used as the basis of a syllogism: perceptions, intelligibles (both primary and secondary) and the results of experience.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | [1] Require no proof | [2] Certain |
| 1 | Conventions | + |  |
| 2 | Traditions | + |
| 3 | Perceptions | + | + |
| 4 | Primary Intelligibles | + | + |
| 5 | Secondary Intelligibles |  |
| 6 | Results of Experience | + |

As can be seen, “traditions” belong only to the first group (1). As Maimonides writes in the “Epistle on Astrology,” “traditions” are not demonstrated by virtue of their content but rather by virtue of being received from “a chosen person or from a chosen assembly.” Unlike Ibn Daud, Maimonides maintains that the credibility of “traditions” is determined by the quality – not the number – of transmitters; the status and credibility of a “chosen” individual is no less than that of a multitude. Maimonides implicitly addresses a possible challenge to his inclusion of “traditions” among “propositions [which] require no proof for their truthfulness.” It could be argued to the contrary that “traditions” *do* require proof. However, Maimonides explains that, in such a case, the need for proof applies not to the content of the information but rather to its transmitter. This implies that “traditions,” like conventions, are limited to a specific population group. It is possible that Maimonides intentionally mentioned conventions, not “traditions,” as sources of knowledge which have a positive correlation between their certainty and their distribution/dispersion.

For our purposes what is important here is that according to Maimonides, “traditions,” like conventions, do not belong to the second group which includes propositions which can be used to formulate a demonstrative syllogism. Other categories can only be used to formulate weaker types of syllogisms: traditions, a rhetorical syllogism, and conventions, the somewhat stronger dialectical syllogism. It will be recalled that Ibn Daud, by contrast, explicitly includes continuous information among certain propositions which can be used in a demonstrative syllogism. In other words, according to him, “traditions,” if they meet the criterion of continuity, have an identical epistemological status to perceptions.

The fact that Maimonides deems “traditions” uncertain proves challenging in a religious traditional context. For example, it casts doubt on the credibility of the miracles which took place during the theophany at Sinai:

For all miracles are certain in the opinion of one who has seen them; however, at a future time, their story becomes a mere traditional narrative, and there is a possibility for the hearer to consider it untrue [...] Now God [...] knew that in the future, what happens to traditional narratives would happen to those miracles [...] the traditional relation of all these miracles is confirmed.[[18]](#footnote-19)

Here, even a detailed narrative only creates a confirmation of *credibility*; it does not, however, prove with *certainty* that an event occurred. In other contexts, however, Maimonides does seem to imply that the perceptions experienced at Sinai have become certain:

Moses our master was not believed on account of the miracles he performed. [...] Why then was he believed? At the theophany at Sinai, when our eyes beheld, and not another’s (cf. Job 19:27), and our ears heard and no one else, the fire, the thunder and the lightning. And he drew near to the thick darkness and we heard [God speak:] “Go tell them the following.” It follows that those to whom he was sent attest to the verity of his prophecy, and [therefore,] no miracle was required [...] (*Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* 8:1)[[19]](#footnote-20)

Maimonides speaks in the first-person plural “our eyes [...] our ears [...] we,” which could be understood as meaning that he includes himself among those present at Sinai; by identifying their certitude with his own, Maimonides could be understood as affirming the epistemological power of “traditions.” However, if we assume that Maimonides is adopting a naturalistic approach (as is his practice) then “those to whom [Moses] was sent,” that is, those who “attest to the verity of his prophecy,” are limited to those people who actually left Egypt. Only to them is the theophany at Sinai a perception. It is, therefore, not impossible that the language employed here has a merely rhetorical purpose, i.e., Maimonides is identifying himself with the generations of the past, but not in an epistemological sense. If we are correct, then those being addressed in Maimonides’ *Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah* are not necessarily to be included in the category of “we beheld with our eyes and heard with our ears as he [=Moses] did.” Maimonides thus provides no justification for the certainty later generations – who know of the account by virtue of “traditions” – accord to the theophany at Sinai,

However, it should be noted that the subject of discussion, whether in the *Mishneh Torah* or the “Epistle to Yemen,” is not the divinity of the Pentateuch/Torah, but rather that only Moses’ prophecy has been proven to be certainly true:

For the prophecy of Moses our teacher [...] we beheld [it] with our eyes and heard with our ears as he did. As an analogy, we can imagine witnesses who testify to a person about something they saw with their own eyes which is different from what he saw. [In such a case,] he would not heed them, and he would know for certain that they are false witnesses (ibid., 8:3).

The credibility of every true prophet, with the exception of Moses, is analogous to witnesses in a court setting; no one in the courtroom saw the event besides the witnesses, and the information they provide thus has the status of a “tradition.” By contrast, the Children of Israel at Sinai experienced Moses’ revelation themselves, by means of perception; having witnessed the revelation directly, they had no place for doubt. Maimonides in this context, does not discuss the particular credibility of Jewish tradition insofar as the theophany at Sinai is concerned. He is only addressing the criteria for considering Moses’ prophecy as certainly true. No other prophet can equal Moses in this respect, according to Maimonides, because the criterion for certainty is concrete presence (the perception of hearing) during a prophet’s revelation.

It is worth noting that neither this discussion, nor its implications, are addressed in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Nevertheless, the superior and unique status of Moses is a central element in Maimonides’ thought. It cannot be overemphasized how important this is for polemics against competing religions – especially Islam, in which Muhammad is regarded as the “seal of the prophets,” annulling the teachings of his predecessors.

In summary, the criteria for regarding “traditions” as certain are without a doubt demanding, perhaps even unattainable. According to Ibn Daud, “traditions” are only certain if they are continuous; according to Maimonides nothing can remedy their poor evidentiary value. Nevertheless, as we will see, neither Maimonides nor Ibn Daud disregard the need to use “traditions” as a source of knowledge.

## **The need for “traditions” alongside perceptions**

Indirect “traditions” are regarded by Ibn Daud as a societal necessity, an argument made a number of times by his predecessor R. Saadia Gaon (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 3:6). Ibn Daud adds that “traditions” are needed for the proper functioning of the justice system which must rely on testimonies to settle disputes:

By means of traditions, the order of the world is preserved and civilization persists. Had it not been for them [order and civilization] would have been abolished. For the order of the world would not decree that anyone in it should be a judge. [...] It is impossible for a judge to be aware of every new state of affairs by [means of his sense perception]. [...] Everything hidden from him could come to him through a report. But if the judge would come forth to deny the testimony [...] the oppressed could not be repaid by the oppressor [...] and they would fight and the order of the world would perish. Therefore, a judge must listen to the words [of the witnesses], examine the evidence and try with all of his ability to receive [it] from trustworthy people. Thus, we have explained the value of traditions. (*The Exalted Faith* 2:5, introduction).

The source of information is those same witnesses who were present at the event. Human society would have great difficulty functioning were we not to place our faith in “traditions”; were we to question the reliability of testimony, the justice system would crumble, and the world would devolve into anarchy: “they would fight and the order of the world would perish.” The conventional norm of accepting the ruling of a judge in cases of dispute is what prevents humans from resorting to more violent solutions. However, since the judge cannot be present at every event under dispute, the verity of testimony must be accepted. The judge’s task then is to “try with all of his ability to receive [testimony] from trustworthy people.” The best way to dispel – or at least mitigate – the doubt which plagues “traditions” is by examining the reliability of witnesses.

The necessity of witnesses for judicial institutions is also described by Maimonides who discusses this in the context of the necessity of retributive justice: “It is clear that there must be [...] punishments [...] judges [...] testimony of witnesses [...] [...] and a ruler” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:41). Maimonides is consistent in his skeptical attitude towards “traditions,” and attributes the reliability of testimony to a religious imperative which is believed under specified circumstances, even if, in principle, testimony does not pass the test of credibility:

Just as we have been commanded to determine judgment based on two valid witnesses, even if they testified falsely, since we regard them to be valid, we treat them as valid, despite the possibility that they may testify falsely. And of such things [Scripture] states “The secret things belong unto the LORD our God; but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever” (Deut. 28:29) (*Hilkhot Yesodei Hatorah*, 7:7).[[20]](#footnote-21)

Maimonides provides a similar explanation for the biblical injunction “The hand of the witnesses shall be first upon him to put him to death” (Deut. 17:7) “For to them it is certain [*yaqīn*] for they perceived through their senses, whereas to us it is a report [*khabar*] of which we know nothing, besides what we have heard from them” (*Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 7:3).

**The necessity for “traditions” alongside intelligibles**

As mentioned, Ibn Daud associates “traditions” with perceptions rather than intelligibles. In other words, information from a “tradition” is analogous to information elicited from an unmediated experience (“the one who perceives them”) in a specific time or place. One who has *not* experienced the information of a tradition under the same conditions as the transmitter must accept them as nothing but a story. Ibn Daud, does, however, attribute to “traditions” additional qualities, distinguishing them from information attained through testimony; he compares “traditions” to philosophical truths transmitted by a teacher. A philosophical truth can, in theory, be attained independently, through a discursive process in the form of an intelligible. Therefore, skipping this intellectual, philosophical process and transmitting only conclusions in the form of a “tradition” demands an explanation. Ibn Daud’s solution is to present “traditions” as “shortcuts.”[[21]](#footnote-22) In this he sees the great merit of the Jewish people, who received divine revelation:

The purpose of their [=philosophers] diligent [investigation] is to bring forth the whole truth after most of the deliberations that they have conducted for thousands of years. But [this knowledge] was given to us without labor and investigation. Rather, we received it as a tradition from a true prophet, and we found that it is explained demonstratively in true philosophy (*The Exalted Faith*, Introduction).

 [Thus,] you see that what is understood by true philosophy after work and effort is understood by the prophets and by some “traditions” through the loving-kindness and the graciousness of God, may He be exalted. (*The Exalted Faith* 2:3)

“Traditions” are thus also justified as an authoritative source of information directed at an audience unskilled in philosophical methodology, an audience which is prone to formulating mistaken beliefs which lead to heresy:

The faith of the masses is that they regard [as] common knowledge that God, may He be exalted [has a body]. [The reason for this is] that they think that what has no body has no existence. However, when they are exhorted, they have faith in the tradition of the fathers and teachers. (*The Exalted Faith* 2:1)

It should be noted that the “tradition of the father and the teachers” is presented here as the opposition to the popular, anthropomorphic perception of God. Maimonides, by contrast, notes in his “Epistle on the Resurrection of the Dead” that even teachers of Halakhah were not convinced of God’s incorporeality.

Ibn Daud argues that his book is unnecessary for those who accept theological truths from Jewish tradition and have no doubts. Such a person “should remain in his innocence and [follow] his tradition, because the purpose of philosophy is action.” (Introduction). In the first part of this statement, Ibn Daud seems to be espousing an approach similar to that expressed by Judah Halevi, who argued that a person who has not been exposed to doubts, has no need for discursive philosophy (*Kuzari* 5:1–2) Likewise, Ibn Daud seems to imply that metaphysical knowledge is nothing more than a means to an end, a way to reinforce religious praxis – a duty shared by philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Nevertheless, he is concerned about a person “who speculates a little in the sciences but does not have the ability to grasp with both of his hands two lights/candles, [namely] in his right hand the light/candle of his religious law and in his left hand the light/candle of his science. Rather, when he lights the light/candle of science, he extinguishes the light/candle of religious law” (Introduction). In Ibn Daud’s opinion, the “exalted faith” is that of someone who is able to grasp both lights at the same time.

As mentioned, Maimonides, unlike Ibn Daud, does not associate “traditions” with perceptions. He defines “traditions” as a separate category though he does not provide an outline of its specific qualities. Maimonides implies that “traditions” lack certainty, even when transmitted, uninterrupted, by reliable people. According to this approach, Jewish tradition is an inferior alternative to independent philosophical study.

This is not to say that attaining truths from a reliable tradition is completely worthless in Maimonides’ thought. To bolster this claim, we can turn to Maimonides’ parable of the palace at the conclusion of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, noting some important elements of those taking the philosophical path. Three intellectual profiles interest us here: the first is completely negative – those who have no hope of reaching the king, i.e. the boors and heretics; the second, relatively positive, is that of the true scholars who already reside in the palace; and the third is those who “believe true opinions on the basis of traditional authority,” who circle the palace – philosophers at the beginning of their path. In this case, Maimonides’ words and actions are consistent. As he says, “they [the entire people] should be made to accept on traditional authority the belief that God is not a body; and that there is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him and the things created by Him” (1:35). He says of himself, in this regard:

We saw that we must elucidate, in our theological writings, fundamental Torah principles, as simple narratives [*al-akhbār*] and not in the form of citing proofs. For the citation of proofs in regard to those fundamental principles requires expertise in many sciences which the Talmudists [*fiqha’ al-sharī‘ah*)] know none at all [...] We have chosen [this approach] so that the truths received from tradition [*maqbūlah*] will at least be accepted by the masses (“Epistle on Resurrection”).

As mentioned, “traditions” transmitted by a reliable source, while perhaps not certain, are nevertheless credible.[[22]](#footnote-23)

**The necessity of “traditions” alongside conventions**

We have so far discussed the use of the term “traditions” (*mequbalot*) to refer to information which can be obtained by other means as well, i.e. as perceptions or intelligibles. Ibn Daud, however, associates “traditions” with another category of information, i.e., content related to religious imperatives:

Some commandments are, in the language of logicians “generally acknowledged” [*mefursamot*], and according to the *Mutakallimūn* they are “rational religious laws” for they have some relation to intelligibles [For example:] that righteousness is good, injustice is evil, that it is good to praise him who is good and it is improper deceive one’s protector, etc. [Now, there are some commandments] which the logicians refer to as “traditions” and the *Mutakallimūn* as “revealed,” [*shim’iot*] such as the observance of the Sabbath and the prohibition against eating pork, etc. [The commandments] that are called “rational” do not vary from one nation to another. This would be impossible [...] different nations agree about generally acknowledged commandments [...] [it is therefore possible] for there to be, in a single state, communities of human beings [who have] many [different] commandments, who believe in opposite traditions, and [who] degrade and deny, and mock each other’s traditions. [But] the generally acknowledged rules bring them together (*The Exalted Faith* 5:5, 2)

We can represent this discussion visually:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Types of Commandments |
| Terminology | According to the *Mutakallimūn* | *Shim’iot* (Revealed) | *Sikhliot* (Rational/Intelligible) |
| According to the Aristotelian “Logicians” | *Mequbalot*(Traditions) | *Mefursamot*(Generally Acknowledged) |
| Examples | “Observance of the Sabbath and the prohibition against eating pork.” | “that righteousness is good, injustice is evilit is good to praise him who is good, and it is improper to deceive one’s protector.” |
| Application | Particularism | Universalism |

Dividing commandments into *mequbalot* and *mefursamot* corresponds to Saadia Gaon’s classification of the commandments as either intellectual or revealed in his work *Beliefs and Opinions* (3:1) Ibn Daud’s universalistic characterization of the Hebrew “*mefursamot*” (corresponding to the Arabic: *mashhūrāt*) is notable. He seems to use the term to refer to norms which are “famous” as opposed those which are a matter of convention (the way the term is generally used). The logic is as follows: societal conventions, which may be dependent on time and place, cannot be considered common to all of mankind. Only ethical imperatives, the results of universal intellect, truly unite humanity. As mentioned, Ibn Daud presents the conclusions of practical philosophy as certain. “Famous” commandments may share a similar status. The group of “*mequbalot/shim’iot*” constitutes the crux of the dispute between different faiths, and Ibn Daud employs quintessential Jewish examples to demonstrate his point – the observance of the Sabbath and the prohibition on consuming pork – the former shifted to another day in competing religions, the latter, completely annulled by Christianity.[[23]](#footnote-24)

This being the case, one may inquire as to the benefit of or need for such commandments. Ibn Daud, in his classification and hierarchy of the Torah, proposes the following categories: on the highest level is philosophical faith; after that, good deeds and proper societal actions; and finally “tradition-based/revealed” commandments:

“Revealed commandments” refers to the details of matters that are arranged by wisdom [...] and their benefit is unclear [...] such as the sacrifices [...] The grade of the commandments of whose causes [the nations] are ignorant is a very feeble grade/level of religious law [...] he who accepts this [claim] by way of faith and righteousness is pious/a believer […] so that he proceeded to harken to the commandments of God, may he be exalted. […] they are the difference between heresy and faith (*The Exalted Faith* 3).

Ibn Daud here cites the sacrifices as an example of commandments which, although subject to a number of rationalizations and explanations, primarily serve as a litmus test to distinguish believers from heretics.

Unlike Ibn Daud, Maimonides, in his introduction to *Avot* (6) rejects the tendency in Kalam thought (“some of our sages who were infected with the disease of the *Mutakallimūn*”) to describe “conventional” commandments as “intelligibles.” However, he seems to have no qualms about using the term “revealed” to designate “traditions,” whether in chapter 6 (“the instances they cite are all from the revealed law”) or in his commentary on *Avot* itself (3:3 “for fear has an important function in the negative precepts certainly the revealed [*al-sama‘iyah*] precepts”). His reluctance to use the term intelligible to describe “conventional” commandments seems to stem from his view that only philosophical intellect deserves the appellation. It is this intellect which is their source.[[24]](#footnote-25)

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* (2:33), Maimonides uses the Aristotelian term “tradition,” noting that the first two of the ten commandments which contain metaphysical truths about God’s existence and unity are intelligibles whereas the remaining eight commandments are “conventions” (*mashhurāt*) and “traditions” (*maqbūlāt*). For example, the Sabbath, is a commandment which is generally considered a “tradition.”[[25]](#footnote-26) Nevertheless, later in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides opposes, on principle, approaches that see an objective dichotomy between different types of commandments: between those which are the product of human intellect (with obvious justification and clear benefit), and those which appear to be arbitrary and devoid of a logical basis. According to Maimonides, all commandments, by definition, belong to the first category. A differential classification is, therefore, purely subjective and epistemological: commandments regarded as arbitrary are simply those whose rationales have been lost over the centuries, in particular those which are meant to correct the beliefs and lifestyles of the generation of the Exodus from Egypt. Because information about the ancient past has been lost, the justifications and benefits of such commandments have been lost as well. However, even if we are obligated to continue observing some of them in order to perpetuate religious law, their benefit is limited. They are “a cure for one of the diseases which today – thank God – we do not know anymore” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:40).

**Traditions and Rabbinic Halakhah**[[26]](#footnote-27)

The credibility of “traditions” are further explored by Ibn Daud in his famous work *The Book of Tradition* – a polemical treatise against Karaism. The work opens with the following explanation:

The purpose of this Book of Tradition is to teach students that all the teachings of our rabbis of blessed memory, namely, the sages of the Mishnah and the Talmud, have been transmitted [*mequbalim*]: each great sage and righteous man having received from a great sage and a righteous man.

The disputes within mishnaic and talmudic literature – which was often marshalled as proof that the true law had been forgotten – is explained by Ibn Daud as follows:

Now should anyone infected with heresy attempt to mislead you saying: “It is because the rabbis differed on a number of issues that I doubt their words,” – you should refute his argument [lit. blunt his teeth], and inform him that he is a “wayward sage” who has rebelled against the court; and that our rabbis of blessed memory never [differed] with respect to the principle of a commandment but only with respect to its details; for they had heard the principle from their teachers, but had not inquired as to its details, since they had not studied from [lit. waited upon] their masters sufficiently (BT Sota 47b).

Had the information been transmitted in full, not just at the initiative of the transmitters but also in response additional questioning from the receivers, legal disputes would not exist. This conception assumes that the entire Oral Law, including all its details and possible applications, were transmitted to Moses at Sinai, and from there from one generation to the next. It was only in the generation of the sages Hillel and Shammai that the transmission of these details was disrupted, necessitating a decision between multiple opinions. Questioning the reliability of the rabbinic tradition is, according to Ibn Daud, heresy and one who does so falls under the halakhic category of a “wayward sage,” who is condemned to death. The founder of Karaism belongs, according to Ibn Daud, to this category: “Anan [...]set out to seduce the Jews away from the tradition of the sages, which the latter had received from the prophets, trustworthy witnesses reporting in the name of trustworthy witnesses [...] thus, he became a wayward sage [...] and fabricated statutes that were not good” (*The Book of Tradition*, 6).

Ibn Daud’s polemic against Karaism and his argument for the credibility of the halakhic, rabbinic tradition in his *Book of Tradition* has significant affinities to Maimonides’ introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*. There, Maimonides presents a consecutive list of the sages who constitute the chain of halakhic tradition stretching back to Sinai. In one of his letters, Maimonides explicitly admits to his polemical motivation in this context:

And I therefore decided to leave no room for the reign of heresy, for they say “you rely on the opinions of individuals.” But this is not so – for it [has been transmitted] from thousands and tens of thousands who received from thousands and tens of thousands. And therefore, I stated at the beginning of the work “so and so and his court received from so and so and his court,” in order to show that the reception was a multitude from a multitude and not an individual from an individual (“Epistle to R. Pinhas the Judge”). [[27]](#footnote-28)

Arguing that a tradition passed from one individual to another is unreliable, the Karaites denied the authenticity of the Oral Law. In order to refute this claim, Maimonides adopted the plural (“so and so and his court”) when describing the transmitters of the Oral Torah.[[28]](#footnote-29)

Maimonides portrays rabbinic law as the product of a tradition, transmitted in full to Moses in a divine revelation and from there, with all its details, to each subsequent generation. According to this, the Sages were nothing more than preservers of the Oral Law – not its generators. However, in light of the aforementioned letter, this may be viewed as nothing more than polemical rhetoric, an attempt to undermine the position of the Karaites. This is indicated by the fact that Maimonides, in the same letter, presents an argument at odds with the idea that the Halakhah was transmitted as a whole – as a closed body of information from one generation to the next, its credibility directly correlated with the reliability of its keepers:

And perhaps, one devoid of understanding will inquire “is it not true that in the Mishnah, the names of Sages are recorded!” thinking that this constitutes evidence [against the authenticity of rabbinic law]. So and so says thus and so and so says thus. [But in truth] this is not a proof. The proof is to understand why so and so said thus and so and so thus. This is the proof. (Ibid.)

Maimonides states that only the explanation of a claim constitutes proof of its truth, not the identity of any specific sage. A similar sentiment is expressed in his famous aphorism “learn the truth from whomever speaks it” (Introduction to *Avot*).[[29]](#footnote-30) This approach implies that such statements are not accorded the status of “traditions” which require no evidence, and which can be ascertained as true by simply examining the character of their transmitters.

The difference between the view of Maimonides and that of Ibn Daud is further thrown into relief by their respective interpretations of the following rabbinic statement: “When the disciples of Shammai and Hillel – who had not studied from [lit. waited upon] their masters sufficiently – multiplied, dissensions increased in Israel and the Torah became like two Torot” (BT Sota 47b). Ibn Daud seems to maintain that these disciples limited themselves to receiving the main principles of the commandments; had they asked their teachers about the details of commandments as well, dispute would never have occurred. Maimonides, however, offers a different interpretation, and even disagrees explicitly to the approach implied by Ibn Daud, “that laws which are subject to dispute, have been received from Sinai.” In Maimonides’ opinion, there is a distinction between “principles received in tradition” (*ha-kelalim ha-mequbalim*) and exegetical innovations (*ḥiddushim she-nilmedu*). It is the latter type of laws, “which are derived from one of the [thirteen exegetical] principles, which are subject to dispute.” Already during the lifetime of Joshua, the Oral Torah was divided into two categories of laws:

And whatever he [=Joshua] or one of the elders received from him [=Moses], was not discussed and was not subject to dispute. [However,] that which he did not learn from the prophet [=Moses] peace be upon him of corollaries he derived from logic [*al-qiyyās*]. For dialectical logic [*al-maqayīs al-jadaliyya*] will befall their logical arguments in this case (Introduction to *Pereq Ḥelek*).

Laws which are details or corollaries are not included in the category of traditions. They are rather the product of dialectics, based on the assumptions which are *mefursamot*, that is, arguments from practical philosophy. Therefore, the source of dispute should not be attributed to “not hearing from his teacher what he ought to have heard.” Maimonides regards this as an unfair accusation, which “casts aspersions on those from whom we received the Torah.” Instead he interprets the phrase “did not serve sufficiently” as “the [skill of] their learning was diminished, and they differed over the principles of derivation [...] during their discussions.” This interpretation could also possibly be interpreted as an accusation, as implied by Saadia Gaon in his *Book of Opinions and Beliefs*: “If the disciples carry through their studies to the end, no controversy or discord arises amongst them” (Introduction). Maimonides, however, will not even admit to this, and refuses to see in the prevalence of dispute the symptom of laziness: “for each one of them deliberated in accordance with his own intellectual capabilities and according to the [exegetical] principles known to him, and they should not be blamed for this.”

In any case, Maimonides, like Ibn Daud, wished to oppose Karaism and to establish the credibility of the Oral Torah. However, he did not consider the details and applications of Halakha to be part of the unbroken, halakhic tradition stretching back to Sinai. It should be noted that Maimonides, unlike Ibn Daud, did not characterize the Karaites as examples of a “wayward sage.” This category applies, according to him, only to someone who opposes a specific ruling made by the court (*Hilkhot Mamrim*, 3:1–3)

**Maimonides and Al-Farabi versus Ibn Daud and Ibn Sina**

We have thus far discussed the views of Ibn Daud and Maimonides on “traditions,” explaining, among other things, their approaches to other sources of knowledge, as well as the different ways they employ these categories in their attempts to prove the authenticity of Judaism. The crux of their dispute is Ibn Daud’s view that “traditions” can attain the status of “continuous information” and can thus becoming certain. By contrast, according to Maimonides, continuity carries no epistemological significance, and provides no certainty. It is their divergent views on this issue which determine how each one treats and uses the category of “traditions.” However, as we have mentioned, both thinkers were Aristotelians. This being the case, one would expect their opinions to be based on Aristotle’s logic and thus, relatively uniform.

Ibn Daud and Maimonides explicitly critiqued the theological arguments of their predecessors because, in their opinion, they did not stand up to the expectations of a demonstrative syllogisms as defined by Aristotelian logic. As recounted in the letter appended to the introduction of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides undertook this critique following the question of one his students who asked whether the methodology of the Kalam school was properly demonstrative, inquiring to which art (*ṣana’ah*) it belonged. Later in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (1:76, second method) Maimonides clarifies that the *Mutakallimūn* rely upon the “text of a prophetic book” and thus their conclusions are “accepted on the authority of a tradition, and not an intellectually cognized doctrine” (*maqbūlan la ma‘aqūlan)* As we have explained, “traditions” cannot serve as the proposition of a demonstrative syllogism.

Ibn Daud also critiqued one of his predecessors over this point. In the introduction to his *The Exalted Faith* he accuses Ibn Gabirol of using syllogisms with “doubtful” propositions even if their form “is true.” However, this accusation should not be construed as a critique of Ibn Gabirol’s use of propositions drawn from religious tradition – i.e. “traditions.” As Ibn Daud explains: “he did not single out the nation alone. Rather, all kinds of people are associated together by him [in this manner]”.

In light of these similarities, what is source of the divergent treatment of the logical principles we have discussed above? To answer this question, we must turn to the Islamic garb of Aristotelian logic in the Middle Ages. Such a perspective sheds important light on the dispute between Maimonides and Ibn Daud over the status of “continuous information,” showing how it harkens back to their Islamic predecessors. To state our conclusion at the outset, Maimonides’ approach reflects that of Al-Farabi whereas Ibn Daud’s approach reflects that of Ibn Sina.

The epistemological status of arguments is discussed as part of a debate regarding the level of certainty needed for information to be used as a proposition in a syllogism. We have noted an example of this above, when we characterized “traditions” alongside perceptions, intelligibles, conventions, and results of experience as described in the *Treatise on Logic* (chap. 8). Likewise, in his discussion of the quality of propositions used in syllogisms, Al-Farabi refers to the following four sources of knowledge: intelligibles, perceptions, conventions and traditions.[[30]](#footnote-31) Israel Efros has already drawn attention to the fact that *The Treatise on Logic* is almost entirely based on Al-Farabi’s system of logic, particularly in its adoption of these four categories of propositions which can be used in a syllogism.[[31]](#footnote-32) This influence is manifest especially in chapter 2, which is copied almost ad verbatim from Al-Farabi’s introduction to the art of logic.[[32]](#footnote-33)

From these sources and others[[33]](#footnote-34) we can see that Al-Farabi does not distinguish between “regular” traditions and continuous traditions. As far as he is concerned, all “traditions” possess the same epistemological status. Al-Farabi maintains that propositions which are based on perceptions and intelligibles can be treated as certain and can be used in a demonstrative syllogism. Conventions, by contrast, are not certain and can only be used in a dialectical syllogism, while traditions, which are likewise uncertain, can only be used in a rhetorical syllogism. Maimonides concurs with this approach in his *Treatise on Logic*.[[34]](#footnote-35)

How does Ibn Sina approach this subject? In this context it is appropriate to cite Devorah Black:

The matter is somewhat different with Avicenna. While reproducing several of Farabi’s premise-categories in his own writings, Avicenna goes far beyond Farabi, adding new categories, extending the classification to include multiple types of premises for all five types of syllogisms.[[35]](#footnote-36)

So as not to burden the reader, and in order to highlight the significant development of Al-Farabi’s system by Ibn Sina, we will visually compare their respective theories of propositions inasmuch as they pertain to the syllogisms relevant to our discussion (demonstrative, dialectical, and rhetoric). We will compare Black’s summary of Ibn Sina’s views[[36]](#footnote-37) to the theory of propositions as expressed in Al-Farabi’s thought:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Avicenna** | **Alfarabi** |  |
| Propositions which must be accepted (*al-wājib qubūl-hā*). Subdivisions include: Primary propositions/First principles (*al-awwalīyāt*)Sensibly-perceived propositions (*al-maḥsūsāt*)Empirical propositions (*al-mujarrabāt*)Intuited propositions (*al-ḥadsiyāt*)**Propositions based on unanimous reports or traditions (*al-tawāturīyāt*)** | Intelligibles Sensible | **Demonstration** |
| Widely-Accepted Propositions (*al-mashhūrāt*)Subdivisions include:Primary propositions (*al-awwāliyāt*) not insofar as they require acceptance, but insofar as they are universally acknowledged as true (*͑umūm al-i͑tirāf*)Esteemed or Praiseworthy Propositions (*al-maḥmūdāt*)Determined Propositions (*al-taqrīriyāt*) | *mashhūrāt* | **Dialectic** |
| Received Propositions (*al-maqbūlāt*), based on authority Supposed or Presumed Propositions (*al-maẓnūnāt*) | *maqbūlāt* | **Rhetoric** |

Most important for our purposes is the fact that continuous information, that is, unbroken and uninterrupted “traditions,” can be used according to Ibn Sina as propositions in a demonstrative syllogism. As mentioned, in Aristotelianism, the only propositions which can be used in a demonstrative syllogism are those which are necessarily true: that is, those which are certain.[[37]](#footnote-38) Ibn Sina is aware of the doubt which may befall propositions derived from “traditions.” Nevertheless, he argues that, in the case of continuous information, the doubt is dispelled, and the “traditions” enjoy a higher status. As he writes:

Similarly, propositions based on transmitted unanimous accounts are those with which the soul finds full tranquility, by means of which doubt is removed due to the multiple observations, even though doubt is possible So that uncertainty regarding the occurrence of these observations in a concordant and a univocal manner is eliminated.[[38]](#footnote-39)

The parallelism between Ibn Sina’s classification of knowledge and Ibn Daud’s is clear. Like Ibn Sina, Ibn Daud admits that “traditions” can be subject to doubt. However, when such “traditions” are continuous, the doubt is dispelled, and the proposition becomes certain. [[39]](#footnote-40)

To this we can add an explanation based on one of Maimonides’ most interesting texts from a methodological-philosophical perspective. This is his famous letter to Ibn Tibbon, in which he recommends a proper philosophical curriculum.[[40]](#footnote-41) The importance of this letter is paramount. Steven Harvey, the recipient of this Festschrift, has discussed this letter, demonstrating the extremely important parallelisms between the curriculum recommended by Maimonides and the curriculum later used by Jews in the Middle Ages to study logic. Harvey thus shows the extent of the influence exerted by Maimonides’ instructions to his translator, Ibn Tibbon, convincingly showing that the letter essentially determined the curriculum of Jewish students of philosophy for hundreds of years to come. [[41]](#footnote-42)

In this letter, Maimonides addresses the works of both Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina. Generally speaking, we can say that while Maimonides holds Ibn Sina in very high regard, this pales in comparison to his esteem for Al-Farabi. For our purposes, it is important to note that even though Maimonides sees great benefit in studying the writings of Ibn Sina, he emphasizes that, for the study of logic, “only the books of Al-Farabi should be consulted.” In other words, if in other disciplines Al-Farabi’s approach is preferable, in logic, Al-Farabi’s approach is exclusive. In what follows, we will propose an explanation for Maimonides’ distinction between logic and other sciences in this regard.

One of the most important distinctions in Aristotelian logic is between those things which are certain and those which are not. The significance of this distinction is so far-reaching that in some senses anything uncertain is, in the estimation of an Aristotelian, non-scientific. Al-Farabi surpasses himself in his analysis of this distinction, even dedicating an entire work to the subject, entitled “the conditions of certainty” (*Sarāʿit al-yaqīn* ).[[42]](#footnote-43) Ibn Sina, by contrast, was clearly not as meticulous in following the demanding conditions stipulated by Al-Farabi. In fact, Ibn Sina strayed from the foundational principle of Al-Farabi’s system – that only sense perceptions and intelligibles can be regarded as certain. Such an oversight, such a sin against scientific truth, was, to Maimonides, unforgivable. It is possible that this is precisely why Maimonides, in his letter to Ibn Tibbon, emphasizes the exclusivity of Al-Farabi’s approach in terms of logic.

Thus, Maimonides and Ibn Daud each incorporated into their respective theological systems their preferred logical approach. This explains why Maimonides rejects approaches similar to that adopted by Ibn Daud. However, we still must explain the reverse; why does Ibn Daud specifically prefer Ibn Sina’s approach? Answering this question is all the more crucial considering that Al-Farabi’s writings on logic were extant in Spain in Ibn Daud’s lifetime[[43]](#footnote-44) and given that Ibn Daud’s writings show his familiarity with Al-Farabi’s works.

It seems that the answer to this question lies in Ibn Daud’s goal. As mentioned, Ibn Daud, like Ibn Sina, assumes that continuous information is certain. This assumption affords him the opportunity to polemicize against Spanish Karaism which doubted and vehemently disputed the validity of rabbinic tradition. While Maimonides did initially oppose Karaism, his attitude seems to have softened after his arrival in Egypt, a region in which Rabbanites and Karaites conducted more cordial relations, in contrast to Ibn Daud who dedicated an entire work to opposing the sect. However, in his response to the Kalam – a school of thought which Ibn Daud, it seems, did not view as negatively – Maimonides argues that traditions, even continuous traditions, cannot be used as propositions in a demonstrative syllogism.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed the different degrees of certainty accorded to “traditions” by Abraham Ibn Daud, the author of *The Exalted Faith*, and by Maimonides, respectively. Ibn Daud’s method, is based on Ibn Sina’s system of logic; he argues that “traditions” with the status of “continuous information” are certain, and therefore can be used as the basis of a demonstrative syllogism. Accordingly, Ibn Daud presents the public revelation on the Mount of Sinai as an event that was confirmed as certain by virtue of the continuity of its transmission. Maimonides, as a disciple of Al-Farabi, suggests a different approach. He does not include “traditions” among certain propositions and only introduces the importance of the public revelation on the Mount of Sinai only in order to prove that Moses was a true prophet. Maimonides prefers to demonstrate the validity of the Torah by characterizing it as the only law which leads to human perfection, the attainment of which every divine law is expected to foster.

1. Based on *Metzudat David*, Proverbs 15:30. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. See for example, Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* 3:6; Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 1:25. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines, Chicago and London 1963, pp. 383–385. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Maimonides*, Letters and Essays by Moses Maimonides,* edited by Isaac Shilat, Maale Adumim 1988, pp. 121–123. [Hebrew]. On this topic, see Howard Kreisel, *Judaism as Philosophy*, Boston 2015, pp. 23–24. By way of analogy we can compare this approach to Maimonides’ criteria for establishing the authenticity of the Messiah – any person who fulfills all the requirements enumerated by Maimonides is, without a doubt, the Messiah. See *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Melachim*, 11:4 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. See Daniel J. Lasker “Rashi and Maimonides on Christianity,” in Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (eds.), *Between Rashi and Maimonides*, (2010) pp. 3–21. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. *Guide of the Perplexed*, supra n. 3, ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. The Arabic original of *The Exalted Faith* is not extant. It is preserved in two Hebrew translations, one by Solomon Lavi and the second by Samuel Ibn Motot. In recent decades, two monographs have been dedicated to it: Amira Eran, *From Simple Faith to Sublime Faith*, Tel Aviv 1998 [Hebrew] and T.A.M. Fontaine, *In Defense of Judaism*: *Abraham Ibn Daud*, Amsterdam 1989. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Abraham Ibn Daud, *The Book of Tradition*, edited by Gerson D. Cohen, Philadelphia 1967. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. For an English translation see Abraham Ibn Daud, *The Exalted Faith*, translated by Norbert M. Samuelson, London and Toronto 1986. Citations in this article will refer to Samuelson’s Hebrew edition. His English translation will be used with emendations based on the Hebrew text. See also Fontaine, supra n. 7, p. 137; Eran, supra n. 7, p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Or as Samuelson translates it: an abstract. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. *The Exalted Faith* supra n. 9, II, 5, introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, supra n. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Fontaine, pp. 158–160. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Eran p. 209; Fontaine p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. *Letters and Essays by Moses Maimonides*, Shilat edition, p. 479. English translation from I. Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader*, New York: Behrman House, Inc., 1972, p. 463. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. We will assume the Maimonidean authorship of this work, despite the reservations expressed by Herbert A. Davidson, “The Authenticity of Works Attributed to Maimonides,” in Ezra Fleischer, Gerald Blidstein, Carmi Horowitz and Bernard Septimus (eds.), *Me’ah Shearim*, Jerusalem 2001, pp 111–133. Davidson’s view is not shared by many scholars. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. In Arabic: *al-ma‘aqulāt al-ūwāl*.” Efros translates: “first ideas.” [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:50. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. See also the “Epistle to Yemen”: “we as well as he, had heard the Divine discourse on Sinai”; “witnessed Moses, our Teacher, foremost among the prophets, holding a colloquy with the Divinity.” An additional problem should be noted in this context. While the meaning of revelation itself is not discussed here (it is merely described as “we heard”; “go and tell them such and such.”) the content of the public perceptions (a voice speaking words) is. This does not accord with the description appearing in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (2:33) in which Maimonides explains “They heard only the great voice, but not the articulation of speech.” This problem notwithstanding, we will only address in what follows those issues directly pertaining to our discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Likewise, in the “Epistle to Yemen,”: “For we are divinely commanded through Moses to render judgment in a suit at law in accordance with the testimony of two witnesses.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Saadia Gaon also discusses the “shortcut” provided by revelation. See *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Al-Farabi already explained that one of the goals of rhetoric, which is based on traditions, is to teach the masses truths that have been proven with certainty via demonstration, a method which lies beyond their ken. See Deborah L. Black*., Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy*, Leiden 1990, p. 134. Black cites there Al-Farabi’s *Kitāb al-Ḥurūf* and includes an English translation of the relevant passage. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. We should note that in the present discussion, Ibn Daud repeats his argument that religious narratives have a dialectical status: “Among those things which cannot change are narratives, that is, narrations of states of affairs that are subject to generation that already have taken place. When [such a narrative] enters into one religious law in one way and into a different religion law in another way, without a doubt there is a difference about what is true and what is false: what is false is not the word of God and what is not the word of God is a fabricated invention/nomos” (*The Exalted Faith* 2:5, 2). “Narratives” or “narrations of affairs subject to generation that have taken place,” are not called here “traditions,” perhaps because in the present context, the term is used to denote the category of revealed commandments. For Ibn Daud’s purposes, it was more important to argue that such commandments could not be changed. In terms of traditions which contain the account of revelation, there is no justification for discussing their abrogation by competing religions. If true – then they were transmitted by God; if false – they are not actually traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. On this subject see: Howard Theodore Kreisel “The practical intellect in the philosophy of Maimonides,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 59 (1988), pp. 189–215 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:32: “Accordingly the *statute* referred to is the *Sabbath*.” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. For another approach see Aviezer Ravitzky and Avinoam Rosenak, *New Streams in the Philosophy of Halakhah*, Jerusalem 2008, pp. 379–38 [Hebrew]. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. *Letters and Essays by Moses* Maimonides, Shilat edition, p. 442. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Ibid., pp. 441–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. This statement was originally used by Maimonides to excuse himself for not citing his sources when not writing original thoughts. It is interesting to note that Al-Ghazali in his *Deliverance from Error* (trans. by Muhammad Abuyalah, Washington D.C., 2001) p. 80 writes similarly, attributing the aphorism to Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and father in law, and the fourth Caliph of the Islamic Empire: “[A] wise man follows the advice of the commander of believers, Ali Ibn Abu Talib, who said ‘Do not recognize the truth in the mouth of certain men, but first recognize the truth and then you will recognize who are truthful.’” In other words, it may be that this aphorism, which Maimonides uses to justify his lack of citations even when expressing unoriginal ideas, is itself not original! [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. For a discussion of the sources of knowledge in Al-Farabi’s works see Black, *Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric*,pp. 94–96. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. *Translation of Treatise on Logic*, ed. by I. Efros, [BIBLOGRAPHIC INFORMATION MISSING]. p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Dunlop, *Alfarabi’s Introductory Sections* *on Logic* [BIBLOGRAPHIC INFORMATION MISSING]. Regarding his classification of the type of proposition which can be used in a syllogism, intelligibles, perceptions, conventions and traditions see the English translation ibid., 275–276. Dunlop has also noted the parallelism between Al-Farabi and Maimonides in *The Treatise on Logic*. See his introduction ibid., p. 264. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. See the discussion in Black, op. cit, as well as that in the previous note. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. On this see Al-Farabi’s discussion (A.J Arberry, “Farabi’s Canons of Poetry,” *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 17 [1937] p. 268) in which he characterizes conventions as close to truth and traditions equidistant from truth and falsehood. See also Al-Farabi’s discussion of conventions as being close to certitude and traditions as only comforting to the soul but nothing more. *Iḥsā’ al-‘ulūm*, ed. A. Milham, Beirut, 1996, pp. 38–42. In these sources as well, we find no distinction between “regular” traditions and “continuous” traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Black, *Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, p. 96. The five syllogisms are demonstrative, dialectical, rhetorical, sophistic and poetic. We are only interested in the first three, those related to perceptions, intelligibles, conventions and, of course, traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Everything presented in the following table as Ibn Sina’s approach is based on Devorah Black’s summary in Black, *Logic and Aristotle’s Rhetoric*, 97–98. For a discussion of Ibn Sina’s different sources, the reader should see Black’s discussion there. For further summaries of Ibn Sina’s complex system of propositions see Ibn Sina, *Remarks and Admonitions*, “Part 1: Logic,” translated by Shams Constantine Inati, Canada [CITY REQUIRED NOT COUNTRY], 1984, pp. 28–30, 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. See Ibn Sina, *Remarks and Admonitions*, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Ibn Sina, *Remarks and Admonitions*, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. *The Exalted Faith*, supra n. 9, 2:5, introduction. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Efros has used Maimonides’ attitude towards Al-Farabi’s logic in this letter to argue for the affinity between *The Treatise on Logic* and Al-Farabi’s logic. See Efros, *The Treatise on Logic*, p. 264. Efros, however, does not explain why Al-Farabi is given preferential treatment by Maimonides. Below we will offer our own answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. See Steven Harvey, “Did Maimonides’ Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon Determine Which Philosophers Would be Studied by Later Jewish Thinkers?” *JQR* 83 (1992), pp. 51. For further details about the letter and Harvey’s approach to it, see Doron Forte, “Back to the Sources: Alternative Versions of Maimonides’ Letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon and Their Neglected Significance,” *JQR* 23 (2016), pp. 45–90. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Fakheri edition. [BIBLOGRAPHIC INFORMATION MISSING]. For further discussions of these demands of certainty see Black, *Knowledge and Certitude*. [BIBLOGRAPHIC INFORMATION MISSING]. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. It seems that Al-Farabi’s writings on logic were circulating in Spain already in the 11th century, as attested to by Said Al-Andalusi’s references to thesm. See Said al-Andalusi, *Book of the Categories of Nations*, translated and edited by Semaan I. Salem and Alok Kumar, Austin, TX 1991, pp. 49–50. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)