



PROJECT MUSE®

Chapter 3. Tradition

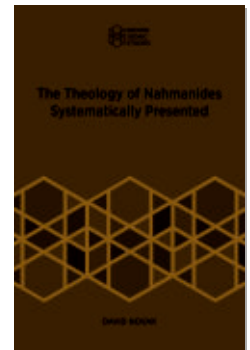
Published by

Novak, David.

The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented.

Brown Judaic Studies, 2020.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.73558>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/73558>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-18 20:34 GMT)

Chapter 3

Tradition

[3.1] Nahmanides was keenly aware that immediate knowledge of God is an exalted, prophetic state, beyond the capacity of ordinary people. Some mediation is needed between the direct knowledge of God and ordinary human knowledge. But such mediation cannot come through knowledge of the physical world. For nature has no consciousness of God. Tradition takes on the critical role of conveying such knowledge. Its credibility comes from our faith in the truthfulness of our parents. The most basic factor in childhood identity, "Whose child am I?", can be a matter of certitude only when the child has faith in the parental intentions. Parents, then, are not only the biological link between the child and creation, but also the noetic link with it. They establish the trust that will enable religious faith to emerge. The veracity of Jewish tradition rests on the trustworthiness of the ancestors. The source of the tradition is divine truth, and in Nahmanides' view only the moral fault of human deceit, not the intellectual fault of human error, could make this tradition untrue. But deceit by our forebears is unthinkable. The tradition we receive from them cannot be doubted. Of the Sinai experience, Nahmanides writes:

The value (*ha-to'elet*) of this commandment is immense. For if the words of the Torah came to us only from the mouth of Moses... then if a prophet or a dreamer arose in our midst and commanded us to act contrary to the Torah... doubt would enter the hearts of men. But since the Torah comes from the mouth of God (*mi-pi ha-Gevurah*) to our ears, and we saw with our own eyes that there was no intermediary (*emtsa'i*), we can refute all who dispute it and belie all who doubt it... For when we tell it to our children, they know that this was true. Without a doubt, it is as if (*ke'ilu*) all the generations saw it for them-

selves. For we would not bequeath them something vain (*hevel*) and useless. [CT: Deut. 4:9 - II, 362]

[3.2] Nahmanides reads the Torah's presentation of genealogies as showing that tradition was transmitted from eyewitnesses to their descendents without interruption, preserving the reliability the account:

It is clear why these families and their dwelling places [are mentioned] and why it is that they were dispersed throughout the world: to validate (*l'ammot*) the account of creation. If one finds it hard to understand how near creation was... the Torah removes this doubt by recalling the genealogy of the families, their names, and the reason for their dispersion and change of languages... For there were only three generations from Adam to the Flood, and each had received the tradition from its father. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 170]

[3.3] In support of the veracity of Scriptural tradition, Nahmanides writes:

The Torah enlightens the eyes even in its stories and narratives. For all of them are of great wisdom and foundational to our faith. For you know from the overt sense of the Scriptural verses that Amram, the father of Moses, saw Levi, who saw Jacob, who learned Torah from Shem the son of Noah... Moses... [in effect] publicly stated, "my father told me this"... Moreover, Shem the son of Noah saw Adam... If this were false, everyone would have known about it and it would have been refuted by many elders and sages of the people who knew history (*divrei ha-yamim*). For all of us know of these public events from the mouth of our elders. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 144]

[3.4] Tradition is clearly a necessity for those whose faith is still developing. This process of development is not simply an individual project; it involves the transmission of authentic tradition from one generation to the next. In moving forward in the knowledge of God, the one "on the way" reaches back across the generations for guidance. Nahmanides illustrates:

For Noah saw his father, who saw the first man... and men in every generation know (*yod'im*) from their fathers. [CT: Gen. 10:5 - I, 65]

[3.5] Our connection, by authentic tradition, with the primal events of sacred history rests on what might be called patriarchal emanation: A human father's authority has its source and limit in God's primordial fatherhood:

A father is to his descendents like a creator, a partner in the act of formation. For the Lord is our first father, and our human progenitor (*ve-ha-moleed*) is our ultimate father. [CT: Exod. 20:12 - I, 403]

[3.6] Although parents are "second creators," honoring them is not an end in itself like the recognition of God, which is foundational:

Now what the human person is commanded regarding faith in God is completed. It begins with the father. For as I command you to honor the first Creator, so I command you to give honor to the second, who gave you being, your father and mother. Thus it says, "in order that your days may be long [on the land which the Lord your God gives you]" (Exod. 20:12). For it is a commandment concerning earthly beings (*tahtonim*) and requires external reward. But the commandment regarding faith in the Creator does not need a reason (*ta'am*) to establish its validity. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 152]

[3.7] Nahmanides' emphasis on the inextricable link between tradition and revelation is clearly visible in his dispute with Maimonides over the status of rabbinic legal exegesis (*derash*) of the Written Torah. The Rabbis differentiated two types of legal exegesis. When they called an interpretation "a matter of Torah" (*dvar Torah*), they meant that the interpretation is the prescriptive *denotation* of Scripture (e.g., B. Baba Metsia 47b). When they called an interpretation *asmakhta*, they meant that the interpretation is only the prescriptive *connotation* of the text (e.g., B. Pesahim 81b). Here a norm formulated by the Rabbis is linked to an appropriate verse in Scripture.

Most often the Rabbis did not label their exegesis (reading out of a text) or their eisegesis (reading into a text) by either term. All undesigned interpretations for Maimonides have the lesser status of connotative interpretations. In general he plays down tradition in favor of independent reason in Halakhah (see, esp., *Hilkhot Mamrim*, 1.1 ff.; and my "Maimonides and the Science of the Law", *Jewish Law Association Studies* [1990] IV, 99 ff.). But for Nahmanides tradition is our only connection with history, and it is in history rather than nature that God is most manifest. Nahmanides' conception of the continuity of tradition and Scripture leads him to the striking affirmation that ultimately all the commandments the Rabbis derived from Scripture by exegesis are Biblical:

If these [commandments the Rabbis learned through the principles of legal exegesis] branch out from these [Scriptural] roots, they are still part of them... Although not counted as separate commandments, it is nevertheless proper to call them "words of Torah," even if they are not numbered among the 613

commandments... Thus we hold contrary to what Maimonides says: anything derived via the thirteen principles of legal exegesis has Scriptural status (*mi-d'oraitia*) unless we hear the rabbis explicitly designate it as *asmakhta*. [*Notes on Maimonides' Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, intro., sec. 2, pp. 32, 34]

Most subsequent Talmudists favored the traditionalist approach of Nahmanides over the rationalist approach of Maimonides here (see, e.g., Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, *Hiddushei ha-Ritba*: Rosh Hashanah 16a). In glossing Talmudic texts where the line between Torah law and rabbinic law was obscure, some later Talmudists (*aharonim*) in fact sometimes fell back on the position of Nahmanides, that ultimately there is no difference (e.g., Samuel Strashun, *Hagahot ve-Hiddushei ha-Rashash*: Gittin 49b).

[3.8] Nahmanides' valuation of the authority of precedent, simply on the grounds of its antiquity, can be seen in his position on a fundamental medieval dispute about the requisites for repealing rabbinic legislation. The Talmud (B. 'Avodah Zarah 36a) ruled that a rabbinic law may be repealed by later authorities if it was not accepted by the majority of Israel. Rashi (s.v. *lo pashat*) takes this as referring to the time of the promulgation of the law. A related passage ('Avodah Zarah 35a) states that the reason for no rabbinic law should be revealed for a year, providing time to ascertain whether the proposed law had gained popular acceptance. Presumably, without such acceptance a reason would be superfluous. But once a rabbinic law had gained acceptance, popular rejection would not suffice for its repeal.

For Maimonides, any disuse, even long after the first promulgation of a rabbinic law, suffices for its formal repeal by a later court (*Hilkhot Mamrim*, 2.7; see Joseph Karo, *Kesef Mishneh ad loc.*). Nahmanides' respect for the authority of tradition leads to his concurrence with Rashi:

You should know that the decree of the disciples of Shammai and Hillel as to not eating bread baked by gentiles was one that most of the community were unable to keep... I say that if the sages and leading authorities of Israel (*gedolei-hem*) were to agree in permitting bread baked by gentiles, it would be permitted, even if their stature were less than that of the disciples of Shammai and Hillel in both wisdom and numbers [of disciples]... With any rabbinic decree (*gezerah*) which the majority of the community are understood to be able to obey, repeal requires a subsequent court greater than the original one in both in wisdom and numbers [M. 'Eduyot 1.5]. But only if it did not actually become the common practice of Israel. If the decree has become common practice (*pashtah*), no subsequent court may repeal it. [*Hiddushei ha-Ramban ha-Shalem*: 'Avodah Zarah 35b, pp. 98-99]

[3.9] Nahmanides does not tire of insisting that "the all-encompassing principle is that the tradition (*ha-qabbalah*) is always true" [CT: Exod. 21:22/1:425]. It is for this reason that the narrative portions of the Torah carry normative import and are more than mere backgrounds to the explicitly prescriptive portions:

The Torah includes the stories (*sippurim*) from the beginning of Genesis on. It instructs (*moreh*) men progressing in the matter of faith. [CT: Introduction - I, 1]

[3.10] Following the teaching of the Midrash [*Shemot Rabbah* 3.11; 5.1], Nahmanides argues that the reason the people of Israel first listened to Moses when he returned to Egypt from Midian was that they had an ancestral tradition "that Joseph handed down (*masrah*) to Levi, saying that Jacob revealed his mystical message (*galah sodo*) to Joseph in love" [CT: Exod. 3:18 - I, 294]. The message was that the first who would come and use the words of Joseph, "God will surely be mindful (*paqod yifqod*) of you" (Gen. 50:26), was to be accepted as their redeemer sent by God. And Moses was indeed the one who said to them, "the Lord, God of your fathers, appeared to me... saying, 'I am surely mindful (*paqod paqadti*) of you, of what is being done to you in Egypt'" (Exod. 3:16).

[3.11] The primacy Nahmanides assigns tradition seems to be at odds with the well known Talmudic statement that "from the day the Temple was destroyed prophecy was taken from the prophets but not from the sages" [B. Baba Batra 12a]. This dictum is often taken to mean that reason now functions as an independent force in the shaping of Judaism. But Nahmanides' sees in the passage a distinction between higher and lower inspiration:

What the passage means is this: Even though the prophecy of the prophets has been removed, that is, revelations and visions, the prophecy of the sages, that is, the method of wisdom, has not been taken away. For they know the truth through the holy spirit within their inmost being (*be-qirbam*). According to the needs of the moment God makes his presence dwell on the pious, even if they are not sages. [*Hidushei ha-Ramban*: B. Baba Batra 12a, p. 105]

[3.12] In a striking interpretation of an oft cited Talmudic passage concerning R. Eliezer ben Hyrkanus, Nahmanides demonstrates just how far he carries his traditionalism. The venerable sage was placed under a ban for refusing to accept the ruling of his colleagues in a matter of Halakhah. Despite his invocation of supernatural phenomena in support of his stance, they refused to accept it. R. Eliezer's obstinacy is usually ascribed to a refusal to accept anything but explicit tradition as the basis of a norm (see

B. Sukkah 28a). But Nahmanides reads the passage as showing that the majority had tradition on their side: Tradition took precedence over the arguments and even the supernatural phenomena invoked by R. Eliezer:

Actually, R. Eliezer was liable only to be placed under a temporary ban (*niddui*), which is used when a rabbi's honor is at issue [here, the honor of his colleague, R. Joshua, which he seemed to make light of in his polemical remarks], as with Aqabiah ben Mehallalel [see M. 'Eduyot 5.6-7]. Some say that because he did not want to relent and said... "a voice from heaven will vindicate my opinion," his position appeared to be heresy (*ke'afqaruta*); he was overly prolonging the dispute, so they placed him under an indefinite ban (*berkuhu*). For what they held was based on a specific tradition (*mi-pi ha-shemu'ah*). But what he said was his personal opinion (*kakh hu b'einei*). That is why they did not accept any of his proofs. Had he so ruled in the days of the Temple, he would have been declared an elder in contempt of the Sanhedrin (*zaqen mamre*). Accordingly, they were strict with him, placing him under an indefinite ban. [*Hiddushei ha-Ramban*: B. Baba Metzia 59b, p. 53]

Strikingly, Baba Metsia does not state that R. Eliezer presented his opinion as his own. But Nahmanides applies a passage from another context, B. Sanhedrin 88a, which holds that a *zaqen mamre* was to be executed if he said "such appears to me" but his colleagues in the Sanhedrin said, "it is a tradition (*mi-pi ha-shemu'ah*)." (I thank David Weiss Halivni for clarifying this point to me.)

[3.13] Nahmanides rejects Aristotle as a guide to true knowledge of God because he "rejected all truth but what he could experience through his senses (*ha-murgash lo*)... For whatever he did not grasp with his own intelligence was assumed to be untrue" (CT: Lev. 16:8 - II, 91). It was bad enough that Aristotle lacked revelation, but far worse for Jews, who had received the Torah, to attempt to constitute religious knowledge without it. It is doubtful that Nahmanides ever read Aristotle, but his objection is not so much against the philosopher himself as it is against those Jewish theologians, especially Maimonides, who sought to ground Jewish thinking on such an inadequate foundation as Aristotelian philosophy.

[3.14] Aristotle's thought, Nahmanides argues, rests on too narrow a base. Had he not lacked revelation and an older tradition (cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 22B), he would not have inferred the impossibility of any real innovation in the world:

He denies a number of things that many have seen. We ourselves witnessed their truth, and they are known (*ve-nitpar-semu*) throughout the world... Because of their [the earliest generations of human beings] propinquity to the creation of the world and to the Flood, there was no one who denied the creation of the world *de novo* or rebelled against God himself... But when the Greeks arose, a new people who did not inherit wisdom, as Halevi explains in the *Kuzari* [1.65], this well-known man [Aristotle] arose, who believed only in the sensory characteristics of nature (*pe'ulah raq le-tiv'im*). Yet it is well and widely known (*u-mefursam*) that this is incorrect. [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 147]

[3.15] Nahmanides holds that revelation provides knowledge to which philosophers aspire but never achieve by their independent efforts, a point made earlier by Halevi (*Kuzari*, 1.4; 4.13; 5.14):

None of the philosophers knows about the created order (*ba-yetsirah*) what the least in Israel does know. For clearly the value (*to'elet*) of the other sciences is only as a ladder to that wisdom which is called "knowledge of the Creator." [KR: *Torat ha-Shem Temimah* - I, 155]

[3.16] Nahmanides underscores the difference between man-made thought and wisdom from God in contrasting Elihu with the other friends of Job:

One sees that once he heard the words of Elihu, Job did not answer him at all. This indeed shows us that his answer was new, not like that of the other friends... One sees that the arguments of the friends were opinions that grew out of their own thoughts... We do not find that any of them called their arguments wisdom (*hokhmah*)... but with Elihu, all of his words are called wisdom, for example: "Be silent and I will relate to you marvelous wisdom" (Job 33:33)... This is an indication that his argument was unique and that it was revealed wisdom, coming from the men of the Torah and prophets. [KR: *Commentary on Job* 32:2 - I, 96-97]

[3.17] Because recognition of God presupposes revelation and tradition, Nahmanides credits the ancient view that Job was an Edomite, descended from Abraham and Isaac through Esau. That is why he could recognize God and observe the rational commandments:

Thus it is probable that this man was of the seed of Abraham, an Edomite. He acknowledged his Creator and served him by way of the rational commandments (*ha-mitsvot ha-sikhliyot*)... Scripture mentions that these men, Job and his friends, were of the seed of the man [Abraham] who was the founder of faith. They still preserved his way, as it is written, "for I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, etc." (Gen. 18:19). [KR: *Commentary on Job* 1:1 - I, 27]

Nahmanides here follows a rabbinic opinion that Job was a gentile (B. Baba Batra 15a-b; Bereshit Rabbah 57.4, ed. Theodor-Albeck, 614, 617). But many rabbinic sources assume that he was a Jew (see Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 5.381-82, n. 3).

realm of the ephemeral and thus to lack real intelligibility. But for Nahmanides, as for Halevi, history held in memory by the people of Israel, reveals God as "the Overseer (*ha-manhig*) of time by his power" (CT: Gen. 21:33 - I, 1125). Yet Nahmanides' historical vision is not focused on development. Like the ancients, he regarded change as insignificant.

way of deeper truth (*derekh ha-'emet*), there is a hidden mystery (*sod ne'elam*) about the sacrifices. [CT: Lev. 1:9 - II, 11-12]

Nahmanides prefers an aggadic, psychological interpretation of the sacrifices to the historicist interpretation of Maimonides (see, also, CT: Lev. 4:2 - II, 22). He took an eclectic position toward Aggadah (see KR: *Disputation*, sec. 39, I,308), but he clearly regards it as part of the authentic tradition. Rationalist Jewish theology for him was not. Ultimately, the closer Aggadah came to the truth of Kabbalah, the more authentic it seemed to Nahmanides. Indeed he used Kabbalah as a criterion to recast many *aggadot*; see E. R. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth."

[3.19] Nahmanides frequently insists on the compatibility of Aggadah with the higher truth of Kabbalah. In one place he writes, "these are words of Aggadah and they are also words of higher truth" (CT: Exod. 1:1 - I, 280). Although Aggadah is on a lower plane than Kabbalah, it is sometimes given preference to the ostensible meaning (*peshat*) of a verse:

We should leave the Scriptural verse in its literal meaning (*ke-mashma'uto*) and pursue the midrashic interpretation... This is what seems the deeper meaning of the passage, so the words of the sages might endure. That is what is beautiful and acceptable. [CT: Lev. 14:46 - II, 84]

