After having discussed the major topics of medieval Jewish theology and before concluding his monumental theological-philosophical study with an account of spiritual life and perfection, Moses Maimonides devotes a chapter of *The Guide of the Perplexed* (hereafter: GP) to the lists, narratives, genealogies, and other apparently insignificant texts of the Bible. These texts became problematic for Maimonides because it was difficult to justify their inclusion in the Bible from his perspective. A major point of GP is that the purpose of the Torah is to promote the “perfection” of human beings through teaching laws, “correct opinions” and theoretical truths. Narratives, genealogies, and lists apparently do not fall to any of these categories; therefore their function in divine Law requires a special explanation.¹

Maimonides proposed several reasons for this. First, he emphasized that genealogies and stories were able to fill the gaps of our knowledge and prevent possible objections against a doctrine by indicating possible responses to objections anticipated by the compiler of the lists or narratives. For example, had the Torah mentioned the creation of the world and the first human couple only in an abstract statement, readers would have objected, “How were the children of the first couple scattered all over the earth; why do they speak such different languages,” etc. The genealogies of the first humans, and especially the list of the nations and their dwelling places (Genesis 10) and the story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) reply to these anticipated objections and establish the credibility of the teaching by giving a detailed account. A similar case is the list of the dwelling places where the Israelites were stationed during their forty years of wandering in the desert

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(Numbers 33). Moses increased the credibility of the story by being able to give detailed information about the route of his people. Thus, the point of these lists was to prove that the compiler had a complete knowledge concerning the topics about which he wrote.

Second, Maimonides points out the mnemonic character of the lists. The persons appearing in biblical lists, for example, the kings of Edom enumerated in Genesis 36, were well-known to the ancient Israelites. When Moses enumerated these names in his lists, the original audience was able to recall all the histories of the kings of Edom. The list was a history of the Edomite kingdom in a summary fashion (*breviter et summatim*, as Hugh of St. Victor would say). Moreover, Moses intended to prove one crucial point: the Edomites had foreign kings who tyrannized them. This was a caveat to the children of Israel to observe the law prohibiting the rule of a foreign king (Deuteronomy 17:15). Finally, Maimonides remarks:

The chronicles of those times are likewise hidden from us today. Hence if we knew them and were cognizant of the events that happened in those days, we would know in detail the reasons of many things mentioned in the Torah.

This sentence opens up a new direction for human thought, a new field of facts waiting to be discovered, the possibility of a new intellectual adventure. Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “institution of a

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2 Cf. Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 82–83 and 209. Maimonides’ approach to the list of the kings of Edom can be compared to the ancient technique of memorizing something by establishing an ordered series of elements (the names of the kings in this case) to which further information (the histories of the kings) are associated like “fish on hooks.” Cf. Carruthers, ibid., 62.


4 Cf. Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 146. Funkenstein’s statement has been criticized by Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, according to whom: “Maimonides’ reformulation of the Sabian myth resembles Plato’s myth of the three metals in the *Republic* more than it anticipates the historical awareness of the seventeenth century as Amos Funkenstein claims.” It seems to me that Tirosh-Samuelson fails to consider two facts that are crucial for Funkenstein: (1) Maimonides utilized non-Jewish sources to reconstruct a chapter of Jewish past; (2) Maimonides contextualized the biblical laws as belonging to a remote past. Analogous features hardly appear in “Plato’s myth of the three metals.” Cf. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, “Maimonides’ View of Happiness: Philosophy, Myth, and the Transcendence of History,” in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David N. Myers (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1998), 200.