The word “tradition” derives from the Latin term traditio ("delivery", "surrender", "handing over"). The various uses of tradition, and of the verbal form tradere, can be conveniently studied in the Bible. In the Vulgate there are some 500 occurrences of the term. Some notable examples are: “Omnia mihi tradita sunt a Patre meo” (“All things are delivered unto me of my father”, Mt 11, 27), “Proprio Filio suo non pepercit, sed pro nobis omnibus tradidit illum” (“He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all”, Rom 8, 32), “Tradidi enim vobis in primis, quod et accepi” (“I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received”, 1 Cor 15, 3), “Relinquentes enim mandatum Dei, tenetis traditionem hominum” (“laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men”, Mk 7, 8), “Proficiebam in Iudaismo supra multos coaetaneos meos in genere meo, abundantius aemulator existens paternarum mearum traditionum” (“profited in the Jews’ religion above many my equals in mine own nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers”, Gal 1, 14). In the terminology of the Early Fathers traditio comes to mean the authoritative infallible preaching of the Church – a usage in accordance with 2 Thess 2, 15: “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle”. There occurs a shift during the Reformation. For Wiclif, Luther and Calvin only the Bible had authority, traditiones humanae were considered invalid, useless. As a reaction, the Catholic side stressed the importance of handed-down teachings not present in the Bible. The resulting, widespread, tendency was to exclude written, as opposed to oral, transmission from the meaning of the term. Samuel Johnson’s definition of the English word tradition fully reflects this tendency.

Johnson lists the meanings “The act or practice of delivering accounts from mouth to mouth without written memorials; communication from age to age” (illustrated by a quote from Hooker: “To learn it, we have tradition; namely, that so we believe, because both we from our predecessors, and they from theirs, have so received”), and “Any thing delivered orally from age to age” – the latter sense illustrated by the telling lines of
Milton, "They the truth / With superstitions and traditions taint". According to the 1864 revised edition Webster dictionary tradition means "The act of delivering into the hands of another; delivery", also "The unwritten or oral delivery of opinions, doctrines, practices, rites, and customs, from father to son, or from ancestors to posterity; the transmission of any opinions or practice from forefathers to descendants by oral communication, without written memorials", and "Hence, that which is transmitted orally from father to son, or from ancestors to posterity; knowledge or belief transmitted without the aid of written memorials". As the theological meaning of the term the Webster gives "That body of doctrine and discipline, or any article thereof, supposed to have been put forth by Christ or his apostles, and not committed to writing". Some main meanings given by the OED are "The action of handing over (something material) to another; delivery, transfer". "Delivery, esp. oral delivery, of information or instruction. Now rare", and "The action of transmitting or 'handing down', or fact of being handed down, from one to another, or from generation to generation; transmission of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, or the like, esp. by word of mouth or by practice without writing. Chiefly in phrase by tradition". And as a "more vague" sense the OED renders: "A long established and generally accepted custom or method of procedure, having almost the force of a law; an immemorial usage; the body (or anyone) of the experiences and usages of any branch or school of art or literature, handed down by predecessors and generally followed".

Modern usage, it appears, does not systematically distinguish between traditions on the one hand, and customs, conventions and the like on the other. Thus for instance that great foe of traditionality, Nietzsche, relatively seldom uses the expression "das Herkömmliche" (his favoured term for tradition). He speaks of "customs", "conventionality", "convention", "fashion", and of prejudice ("opinions" of the "appropriated" or "public" kind, as he puts it). H. B. Acton defines tradition as "a belief or practice transmitted from one generation to another and accepted as authoritative, or deferred to, without argument", and goes on to write: "it is clear that tradition and custom are closely connected, if not identical, notions, though we tend, perhaps, to use the word 'tradition' for the more elaborate and civilised forms of custom. A fuller treatment of them both would lead to the examination of such conceptions as those of habit and skill". By contrast, Max Radin emphasizes that "only some of the inherited or transmitted customs,