

PART I



*The Emergence of
Christian Theology (ca. 150–300)*

I

Ptolemy, *Letter to Flora*

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INTRODUCTION

Ptolemy was a well-known Christian who flourished in the mid-second century (ca. 136–180), probably in Rome. He followed the teachings of Valentinus, a brilliant and eloquent Christian philosopher.¹ We know little about the life and career of Ptolemy other than that he was one of Valentinus's first students, and an outstanding one at that, unafraid to modify and push his teacher's vision further. Irenaeus of Lyons purports to describe Ptolemy's version of the gnostic myth in *Against Heresies* 1.1.1–1.8.5, which includes an account of Valentinian cosmology and the multitude of divine entities, including the Father of the entirety, the Savior, the Craftsman, the Devil, and all the Aeons of existence. The *Letter to Flora*, however, largely avoids such cosmological discussion and focuses on the question of the spiritual significance and authorship of the Pentateuch (the first five books of what later Christians would call the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, all of which were traditionally attributed to Moses). Many second-century Christians, especially those from a non-Jewish background, were beginning to understand "Christianity" as something distinct from "Judaism," but still regarded the Jewish scriptures as inspired texts that revealed knowledge of God, the divine order, creation, community, and sin. The integration of the Jewish scriptures with the Savior's teaching ultimately raised the question of the consistency of God. In the *Letter to Flora* Ptolemy argues that the Pentateuch has three authors (God, Moses, and the "elders") and that the part authored by God still has relevance in the Christian life, provided one knows how to properly read it. Ptolemy thereby stakes out a different position from other early Christian interpreters, including those who attribute the Jewish scriptures to the highest God and those who attribute them to

1 For more on Valentinus see the introduction to the *Gospel of Truth*, p. 11.

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the Devil. The latter is perhaps a polemical caricature of the position of Marcion.

This philosophical epistle, composed for an introductory-level student, lays the groundwork for Ptolemy to build a complex account of Valentinian metaphysics and cosmology in a separate, more advanced treatise (which unfortunately does not survive). The *Letter to Flora* does not come down to us as an independent text; rather, it is embedded within Epiphanius of Salamis's *Panarion* 33.3.1–33.7.10, who transcribed the Greek word for word. The critical edition from which this translation is made is Gilles Quispel, *Ptolémée: lettre à Flora*, Sources chrétiennes 29 (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1966), 50–72.

TRANSLATION

3, 1. Once you, my noble sister Flora, come to learn of the divergent opinions on the subject, I think you'll clearly see that many people before now did not fully understand the law given through Moses, since they did not have nuanced knowledge of its giver or its ordinances. 2. Some claim that it was God the Father who issued the legislation. Others, taking the opposite tack, obstinately maintain that it was the Adversary who gave it, that devil who produces corruption, just as they also attribute the world's creation to him and claim that he is the Father and Maker of this universe.² 3. These positions are completely mistaken; each contends with the other, yet each in its own way completely misses the truth of the matter. 4. For it appears that it is not the perfect God and Father who gave it. This conclusion follows since the law is imperfect, needs completion by something else, and possesses ordinances incompatible with the great God's nature and thought. 5. Then again, we shouldn't attribute the law, which annuls injustice, to the Adversary's injustice. This is the conclusion of those who don't pay attention to the Savior's words, "A house or city divided against itself cannot stand" – this is what our Savior declared.³ 6. Moreover, dismissing in advance the insubstantial wisdom of those who speak falsely, the apostle says that all things came into being through him and that nothing came into being apart from him⁴ and that the world's creation belongs to a just and evil-hating God, not a creator of corruption. This is the view of people without forethought, who don't think that the cause belongs to the

2 See Plato, *Timaeus* 28c. 3 Mt 12:25. 4 Jn 1:3.

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craftsman's forethought, who are blind not only in the eye of the soul, but also in that of the body. 7. My statements, then, should make it clear to you that these people have gone utterly astray from the truth. Each of them has suffered this in their own way, some because they have no knowledge of the God of Justice and others because they have no knowledge of the Father of the whole, whom [the Savior] revealed, the only one who came, the only one who knows him.⁵ 8. It remains for us who have been deemed worthy of knowledge of both of these to expound upon and precisely describe to you the law itself, its origin, and the legislator by whom it was given, providing proofs of what we'll say from the words of our Savior. Only through these can we be led unfalteringly to an apprehension of what truly exists.

4. 1. You must first learn, then, that the whole law included within Moses's Pentateuch has not been legislated by one particular entity – I mean, not by God alone – but that several of its ordinances have also been given by human beings. The Savior's words also teach us that it consists of three parts. 2. One part belongs to God himself and his legislation, another part belongs to Moses (not that it was God legislating through him, but rather Moses proposing his own idea and making it law), and the last part belongs to the elders of the people, whom we can spot inserting some of their own commandments right from the beginning.

3. You will now learn how the Savior's words show this. 4. Somewhere speaking with his disputants on the subject of divorce, the Savior said to them, "Your hardness of heart is the reason that Moses permitted [a man] to dismiss his wife. In the beginning, however, it was not like this. For he says that God brought this union together, and what the Lord has brought together," the Savior continued, "let no human separate."⁶ 5. Here he shows that there is one law of God, which bars a wife from separating from her husband, and another law of Moses, which permits the couple to be separated due to their hardness of heart. 6. What's more is that Moses, in this instance, gives laws contrary to those of God: parting is certainly the opposite of not parting. Of course, were we to scrutinize the intention with

⁵ See Mt 11:27.

⁶ See Mt 19:6–8. Ptolemy has reversed the sequence of the quotation – the original Matthean passage reads, "'Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' They said to him, 'Why then did Moses command us to give a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her?' He said to them, 'It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so'" (Mt 19:6b–8 NRSV). Additionally, Ptolemy has interpolated the phrase, "God brought this union together."

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which Moses gave this legislation, we would find that he crafted it not of his own free choice, but of necessity, due to the weakness of those to whom he legislated. 7. Because these people could not abide by God's intention, which did not allow them to toss away their wives with whom some of them were dwelling in a loathsome way, and ran a greater risk of turning from this to injustice, and from that to destruction, 8. Moses gave them a second law on divorce of his own accord in order to exchange a greater evil for a lesser one given the circumstances, since he wanted to extract from them this loathsome quality that put them on the brink of destruction. 9. This way, if they could not abide by the former, at least they could abide by the latter and not turn to crimes and vices that would immediately lead to their complete and utter ruination. 10. Such was his intention, according to which we find him legislating against God. Even if shown here through a single example, we have proven, at any rate, that the second law indisputably came from Moses himself and that it is contrary to God's law.

11. The Savior also makes clear that some of the elders' traditions are interwoven within the law. He says, "For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother so that you will be well.' 12. But you," he says, now speaking to the elders, "have declared, 'Whatever support you had from me was a gift to God,' and you voided God's law because of your own tradition," namely, that of the elders.⁷ 13. Isaiah pronounced this when he said, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart remains far from me, and they worship me in vain, teaching the precepts of humans as their doctrines."⁸

14. We have plainly shown, therefore, from these points that the whole law consists of three parts: we can identify the legislation within it belonging to Moses himself, to the elders, and to God himself. And so, such a division of the whole law, made by us here, has disclosed the truth within it.

5, 1. Furthermore, one part, the law of God himself, consists of three parts. The pure legislation is that which is not interwoven with evil, that which is properly called "law," that which the Savior came not to abolish

7 See Mt 15:4–6. Out of context, the quotation's meaning is murky. The original Matthean passage reads, "For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God" (trans. NRSV). The idea is that the Pharisees and scribes (or as Ptolemy calls them, the elders) have exempted those who give honor to God from honoring their parents, which Jesus clearly views as a revocation of God's law.

8 Is 29:13 (LXX); Mt 15:7–9.

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but to fulfill⁹ (for what he fulfilled was not foreign to him, but required fulfillment, since it was not perfect). The second part is that which is interwoven with inferiority and injustice; this is what the Savior annulled since it is incompatible with his own nature. 2. The last part is that which was given according to the image of spiritual and transcendent realities, the figurative and symbolic legislation [whose signification] the Savior changed from the perceptible and external to the spiritual and invisible.

3. The Decalogue¹⁰ is the law of God, pure and not interwoven with inferiority, those ten statements on two tablets divided into a prohibition of things from which one must abstain and a command of things that one must do. While they do contain pure legislation, they are not perfect and were in need of fulfillment by the Savior. 4. The part that is interwoven with injustice was established for vengeance and retribution of crimes already committed, bidding an eye to be cut out for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and to avenge one murder with another.¹¹ A second injustice is no less an injustice: it differs only in the sequence, but accomplishes the same task. 5. Anyhow, this decree both was and is just, given due to the weakness of those for whom the law was produced, but incompatible with the nature and goodness of the Father of the whole. 6. Perhaps it was appropriate and even necessary. For the one who does not want there to be even a single murder by saying, “You shall not murder,”¹² commands the murderer to be murdered in turn by producing a second law and thereby presiding over two murders; even though he prohibited a single one, he forgot himself and was cheated by necessity. 7. This is why the Son, once he came from him, annulled this part of the law while acknowledging that it too came from God. In other passages, he simply counts¹³ it as belonging to the old way of thought,¹⁴ such as when he says, “God said, ‘Let anyone who reviles their father or mother be put to death.’”¹⁵

8. Then there is the law’s figurative part, established according to the image of the spiritual and transcendent realities, I mean, the decrees pertaining to sacrificial offerings, circumcision, the Sabbath, fasting, the Passover lamb, the unleavened bread, and the like. 9. Being images and symbols, [the signification of] all these things changed once the truth was revealed. Their

⁹ See Mt 5:17. ¹⁰ Ex 20:1–17; Dt 5:4–21. ¹¹ Lv 24:20–21. ¹² Ex 20:13.

¹³ Reading *katarithmeitai* (see K. Holl, *Epiphanius, Bände 1–3: Ancoratus und Panarion*, GCS 25 [Leipzig: Heinrichs, 1915], 454) in place of Quispel’s *kataruthmeitai*.

¹⁴ Israelite religion prior to the Savior’s appearance.

¹⁵ Mt 15:4, quoting Ex 21:17, Lv 20:9.

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external signification, along with any bodily performance of laws, has been nullified while their spiritual signification has been restored; the names remain the same while the underlying realities have been altered. 10. For the Savior commands us to make offerings, not through irrational animals or incenses, but rather through spiritual praises, glorifications, and thanksgivings as well as communion with and beneficence toward our neighbor. 11. He also wants us to undergo circumcision, not of the bodily foreskin but of the spiritual heart, 12. and to keep the Sabbath, for he wishes us to be at rest from evil works, 13. and to fast. He does not want us to keep a bodily fast, but a spiritual one in which we renounce all bad things. However, we should keep an external fast too, since one accompanied by reason can improve the soul so long as it is not done simply to imitate certain people, or because of habit, or because of the day, as though a day was set aside for this purpose. 14. At the same time, [he wants us to fast] in commemoration of the true fast so that those who cannot yet endure the external fast have a reminder¹⁶ of it. 15. The same is true with the Passover lamb and the unleavened bread: Paul the apostle makes clear that they are images when he says, “Christ was sacrificed as our Passover lamb,” and, “That you may be unleavened, not sharing in the yeast” – he means now the evil yeast – “but that you may be a new batch.”¹⁷

6. 1. And so, what we confess to be the law of God itself consists of three parts in this way. One part was fulfilled by the Savior, for “You shall not commit murder,” “You shall not commit adultery,” and “You shall not swear falsely”¹⁸ are included in [the Savior’s instruction] to not get angry, to not lust, or to not make an oath.¹⁹ 2. The second part was completely annulled by him, for, being interwoven with injustice and having the same task of injustice, the Savior has annulled “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”²⁰ with his statements to the contrary. 3. Contrary statements cancel each other out: “For I say to you, do not resist the wicked person at all, but if anyone strikes you, turn your other cheek to him too.”²¹ 4. The last part is that which was changed and altered from the bodily signification to the spiritual and symbolic, that which was legislated according to the image of the transcendent realities. 5. So long as the truth had not arrived, the images and symbols were valuable in that they indicated other underlying realities. But when the truth arrived, it became necessary to do things proper to the truth, not

16 In Greek, *anamnēsis*. This is the same word as “commemoration” above.

17 See 1 Cor 5:7. 18 Ex 20:13–14, 16. 19 See Mt 5:22, 28, 34.

20 Lv 24:20–21. 21 Mt 5:39.

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to the image. 6. His disciples showed these things, and so did the apostle Paul, who demonstrated that one part pertains to images, as we've already said, through "the Passover lamb for us" and "the unleavened bread,"²² that another part of the law has been interwoven with injustice, saying, "The law of the commandments has been abolished in his teachings,"²³ and that the last part pertains to what is not interwoven with the inferior, saying, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, just, and good."²⁴ 7, 1. In short, I think that you have sufficiently seen how human legislation has crept in and how the law of God itself consists of three parts.

2. It remains for us to say who this law-giving God could possibly be. However, if you were listening carefully, I think that you may have picked up on it from my earlier statements. 3. For if it was given neither by the perfect God himself (as we instructed you) nor indeed by the devil (what a sacrilegious statement that would be!), then the lawgiver must be someone other than these two. 4. He is the craftsman and creator of the universe and its contents. Since he is different from the essences of the other two, and since he is appointed between them, he rightly bears the name of "Intermediary."²⁵ 5. If the perfect God is good according to his own nature, as he most certainly is (for our Savior declared that his own Father, whom he made known, is the only good God),²⁶ and if the one who is the Adversary by nature is evil and wicked, since he is characterized by injustice, then [the Intermediary] is properly said to be just, since he stands between them, being neither good nor indeed evil nor unjust, but a judge of righteousness in his own right. 6. And this God will be inferior to the perfect God and less than his righteousness inasmuch as he is begotten and not unbegotten (for there is one unbegotten, the Father, from whom all things come²⁷ because all things depend on him in their own way), and he will be greater than and superior to the Adversary, since he naturally is of a different essence and nature than the essence of each of these. 7. The Adversary's essence is corruption and darkness (for it is material and variegated), but the unbegotten Father of the entirety's essence is incorruption and self-existent light, simple and singular. The Intermediary's essence, while presenting a certain double power, is an image of the better.

²² 1 Cor 5:7. ²³ Eph 2:15. ²⁴ Rom 7:12.

²⁵ Within Ptolemy's cosmology, the Intermediary is the God of the Middle, where the just find final repose. For comparison, see Irenaeus's account in *Against Heresies* 1.4.1–1.5.4, 1.7.4, 1.8.4.

²⁶ See Mt 19:17. ²⁷ See 1 Cor 8:6.

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8. Now, since it is in the nature of the good to beget and produce things that are similar and the same in essence to itself, don't let this disturb you in your willingness to learn how these natures – one of corruption and one of the Intermediary, now established as entities of different essences – have come to exist from the one source of all things, which we acknowledge and believe to be simple, unbegotten, incorruptible, and good. 9. If God grants it, you will learn for yourself the source and beginning of these things in due time, as you are worthy of the apostolic tradition that we too have received in succession, along with the power to measure all assertions with the teaching of our Savior. 10. I have not exhausted myself in these brief statements to you, my sister Flora. I have written a concise composition and at the same time discussed the subject sufficiently. These things will be of great service to you in the future if, like rich and fertile soil that has received viable seeds, you use them to bear fruit.²⁸

²⁸ See Mt 13:23.