

# PTOLEMY'S EPISTLE TO FLORA

(PtF)

## Contents

The meaning and value of the Jewish bible—which Christians eventually called “the Old Testament”—was one of the burning issues faced by Christianity in the second century. At this time, more and more Christians came from a non-Jewish background, and Christian theologians began to measure themselves against the teachings of secular Hellenistic philosophy. Many branches of Christianity had to face this issue, the gnostics no less than any other. Classic gnostic myth (cf. BJn) and its Valentinian successor (IrV, IrPt) obviously expressed a massive revision of the cosmogony and history taught in the books of Moses. Other sources show that gnostics and Valentinians addressed also the problem of the Old Testament prophecies and their authenticity, cf. IrSat 1.24.2, IrPt 1.7.3.

To Valentinian gnostics all these aspects of the Old Testament problem were systematically related, for the Valentinian myth of origins provided an interpretive key to all religious scripture, expression, practice, and belief. A presentation of Valentinian Christianity might therefore begin at almost any point in the system. In PtF, the great Valentinian teacher Ptolemy chooses to begin a systematic course of instruction by starting with the question of religious laws and observances. His addressee is a female adherent of ordinary Christianity named Flora. His manner of presentation is elementary, using terms that are moral and nonmetaphysical, and almost entirely within the realm of conventional Christian language (for another example of elementary Valentinian instruction, see TRs). Ptolemy begins with a clear and careful analysis of the multiple authorship of Old Testament laws, characterizes the nature of the laws by comparing them with the teachings of Jesus, and from their nature draws conclusions about the god who legislated them.

Ptolemy's conclusions take him to the very edge of metaphysics and myth, which he promises will form the next lesson of his course (for a summary of Ptolemy's metaphysics, see IrPt; his next lesson to Flora does not seem to have survived). One can distinguish, Ptolemy concludes, a perfect god, who is good; the god of Israel and the Old Testament, who is just; and the devil, who is evil. He carefully contrasts this view with positions that assert only two principles (god and the devil). In comparison with the theology of BJn or RAd, Ptolemy's tripartite scheme shows a relatively positive attitude toward the craftsman of the world or god of Israel; some classic gnostic scriptures also follow the same tripartite scheme, cf. RR 95:13f.

In the opening of the *Epistle*, Ptolemy sets out to refute two other opinions on the source of the Old Testament law. One opinion identified the legislator with the highest god; this was the view of ordinary Christianity and a great part of Judaism.

The other identified the legislator with the devil; scholars have been uncertain about the source of this opinion, but it may refer to gnostics who followed a myth like that of BJn or RAd, where the craftsman of the world (Ialdabaoth) appears to be identical with the god of Israel.

## Literary background

Ptolemy, the author of PtF, is discussed in the introduction to IrPt (“Literary background”). The place of composition is unknown, but since Ptolemy was active in the western part of the Roman empire some scholars have suggested Rome. The exact date of composition is unknown; Ptolemy flourished roughly between A.D. 136 and 180 (or 136 and 152). His language of composition is Greek.

According to its title, the work is a *philosophical epistle*, that is, a short formal essay couched in the framework of a letter. The genre of philosophical epistle was used by both Valentinus (VFrC, E, and H) and the author of TRs; it was much favored by academic writers of the period. However, PtF lacks the customary epistolary salutation (“I greet you”) at the end. Apart from its opening formula (“Ptolemy to Flora”) PtF is simply a treatise addressed by name to a dedicatee, as was customary.

## Text

The text is known only from a word-for-word quotation by the fourth-century father of the church St. Epiphanius of Salamis in his work *Against Heresies* 33.3.1–33.7.10, written about A.D. 375. St. Epiphanius's original Greek text is attested by a number of medieval manuscripts, whose accuracy is a matter of debate among scholars. The translation below is based upon Quispel's critical edition of the Greek, with very minor alterations: G. Quispel, ed., *Ptolémée* (see “Select Bibliography”), 50–73.

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Fallon, F. “The Law in Philo and Ptolemy: A Note on the Letter to Flora.” *Vigiliae Christianae* 30 (1976): 45–51.
- Quispel, G., ed. *Ptolémée, Lettre à Flora: Analyse, texte critique, traduction, commentaire et index grec*. 2d ed. Sources chrétiennes, no. 24 bis. Paris: Le Cerf, 1966.

# PTOLEMY TO FLORA

## A. PROLOGUE

### Difficulty of the topic

**33.3.1** The law established by Moses,<sup>a</sup> my dear sister<sup>b</sup> Flora, has in the past been misunderstood by many people, for they were not closely acquainted with the one who established it or with its commandments. I think you will see this at once if you study their discordant opinions on this topic.

### False opinions on the topic

**33.3.2** For some<sup>c</sup> say that this law has been ordained by god the father;<sup>d</sup> while others,<sup>e</sup> following the opposite course, stoutly contend that it has been established by the adversary, the pernicious devil; and so the latter school attributes the craftsmanship of the world to the devil,<sup>f</sup> saying that he is "the father and maker of the universe."<sup>g</sup> **33.3.3** (But) they are (utterly)<sup>h</sup> in error, they disagree with one another, and each of the schools utterly misses the truth of the matter.

### The law not established by the perfect god

**33.3.4** Now, it does not seem that the law was established by the perfect god and father: for, it must be of the same character as its giver; and yet it is imperfect and needful of being fulfilled by another and contains commandments incongruous with the nature and intentions of such a god.

### Nor by the devil

**33.3.5** On the other hand to attribute a law that abolishes injustice to the injustice of the adversary<sup>i</sup> is the false logic<sup>j</sup> of those who do not comprehend the principle of which the savior spoke. For our savior declared that a house or city divided against itself will not be able to stand. **33.3.6** And, further, the apostle<sup>k</sup> states that the craftsmanship of the world is his, and that "all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made," thus anticipating these liars' flimsy wisdom. And the craftsmanship is that of a god who is just and hates evil, not a pernicious one as believed by these thoughtless people,<sup>l</sup> who take no account of the craftsman's forethought and so are blind not only in the eye of the soul but even in the eyes of the body.<sup>m</sup>

33.3 a. In the first five books of the Old Testament.

b. I.e. "my dear fellow Christian."

c. Ordinary Christians and many Jews.

d. I.e. the perfect "parent" or deep. Traditional Christian language ("father") has been retained in this English translation of PTF, in keeping with the deliberately conventional nature of its vocabulary.

e. Possibly meaning gnostics; cf. Introduction, "Contents."

f. Ialdabaoth in classic gnostic myth like that of B'n.

g. With this phrase, Ptolemy evokes the

philosophical myth of creation in Plato's *Timaeus* (28e).

h. "<But>, <utterly>": these words are inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

i. The devil.

j. The Greek text is corrupt here, and the exact meaning is disputed by scholars.

k. John.

l. Or "these people without providence."

m. The creator's forethought is evident in the orderly and providential workings of the natural world, which can be seen with the eyes.

## The topic

**33.3.7** Now, from what has been said it should be clear to you (sing.) that these (schools of thought) utterly miss the truth, though each does so in its own particular way: one (school) by not being acquainted with the god of righteousness,<sup>n</sup> the other by not being acquainted with the father of the entirety, who was manifested by him alone who came and who alone knew him. **33.3.8** It remains for us, who have been deemed worthy of (acquaintance)<sup>o</sup> with both, to show you (sing.) exactly what sort of law the law<sup>p</sup> is, and which legislator established it. We shall offer proofs of what we say by drawing from our savior's words, by which alone it is possible to reach a certain apprehension of the reality of the matter without stumbling.

## B. EXPOSITION: THE NATURE OF THE LAW

### I. THE THREE DIVISIONS OF THE LAW

#### Multiple authorship of the law

**33.4.1** Now, first you must learn that, as a whole, the law contained in the Pentateuch of Moses was not established by a single author, I mean not by god alone: rather, there are certain of its commandments that were established by human beings as well. Indeed, our savior's words teach us that the Pentateuch divides into three parts. **33.4.2** For one division belongs to god himself and his legislations; while (another division)<sup>q</sup> belongs to Moses—indeed, Moses ordained certain of the commandments not as god himself ordained through him, rather based upon his own thoughts about the matter; and yet a third division belongs to the elders<sup>r</sup> of the people, (who)<sup>s</sup> likewise in the beginning must have inserted certain of their own commandments. **33.4.3** You will now learn how all this can be demonstrated from the savior's words.

#### Legislation of god distinct from legislation of Moses

**33.4.4** When the savior was talking with those who were arguing with him about divorce—and it has been ordained (in the law) that divorce is permitted—he said to them: "For your (pl.) hardness of heart Moses allowed divorce of one's wife. Now, from the beginning it was not so." For god, he says, has joined together this union, and "what the lord has joined together, let no man put asunder." **33.4.5** Here he shows that (the)<sup>t</sup> law of god is one thing, forbidding a woman to be put asunder from her husband; while the law of Moses is another, permitting the couple to be put asunder because of hard-heartedness. **33.4.6** And so, accordingly, Moses ordains contrary to what god ordains; for (separating)<sup>u</sup> is contrary to not separating.

Yet if we also scrutinize Moses' intentions with which he ordained this commandment, we find that he created the commandment not of his own inclination but of necessity because of the weakness of those

n. Cf. 33.7.5.

o. This word is inadvertently missing in the MSS.

p. I.e. in the first five books of the Old Testament.

33.4 a. These two words are inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

b. Or "presbyters." Ptolemy refers here

to the elders who were with Moses "in the beginning."

c. This word is inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

d. This word is inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

e. This word is inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

Mt 11:27

same

use of J

MS 2

? "nothing"

IrP 1.7.3

Plato Ti. 28e

Mt 12:25

Jn 1:3

IrP 1.8.5

Mt 19:8

Mt 19:6

Di 24:1

Mt 19:7

to whom it was ordained. 33.4.7 For the latter were not able to put into practice god's intentions, in the matter of their not being permitted to divorce their wives. Some of them were on very bad terms with their wives, and ran the risk<sup>f</sup> of being further diverted into injustice and from there into their destruction. 33.4.8 Moses, wishing to excise this unpleasant element through which they also ran the risk of being destroyed, ordained for them of his own accord a second law, the law of divorce, choosing under the circumstances the lesser of two evils, as it were, 33.4.9 so that if they were unable to keep the former (that is, god's law) they could keep at least the latter and so not be diverted into injustice and evil, through which utter destruction would follow in consequence. 33.4.10 These are Moses' intentions, with which we find him ordaining laws contrary to those of god. At any rate, even if we have for the moment used only one example in our proof, it is beyond doubt that, as we have shown, this law is of Moses himself and is distinct from god's.

#### Traditional legislation of the elders

33.4.11 And the savior shows also that there are some traditions of the elders interwoven in the law. He says, "For god spoke: 'Honor your father and your mother, that it may be well with you.' 33.4.12 But you have declared," the savior says, addressing the elders,<sup>g</sup> "'What you would have gained from me is given to god.' And for the sake of your tradition, O ancients, you have made void the law of god."<sup>h</sup> 33.4.13 And Isaiah declared this<sup>i</sup> by saying, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men."<sup>j</sup>

33.4.14 Thus it has been clearly shown from these passages that, as a whole, the law is divided into three parts. For we have found in it legislations belonging to Moses himself, to the elders, and to god himself. Moreover, the analysis of the law as a whole, as we have divided it here, has made clear which part of it is genuine.<sup>l</sup>

## 2. THE THREE SUBDIVISIONS OF GOD'S OWN LAW

33.5.1 Now, what is more, the one part that is the law of god himself divides into three subdivisions.

### Nature of the subdivisions: (1) Pure but imperfect

The first subdivision is the pure legislation not interwoven with evil, which alone is properly called law, and which the savior did not come to abolish but to fulfill.<sup>a</sup> For what he fulfilled was not alien to him, (but stood in need of fulfillment):<sup>b</sup> for it did not have perfection.

f. By leaving their wives, thus breaking god's original command and entering upon a course of lawbreaking.

g. Cf. note 33.4b.

h. This exchange is reported in Mt 15:3-6, where Jesus disputes with Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem: "He (Jesus) answered them, 'And why do you transgress the commandment of god for the sake of your tradition? For god commanded, "Honor your father and your mother," and, "He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die." But you say, "If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to god," he need not honor his father." So, for the sake

of your tradition, you have made void the law of god.'" In the succeeding verses of Mt, Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13, exactly as below.

i. As quoted by Jesus in Mt 15:8f.

j. I.e. only god's own law is genuinely divine.

33.5 a. Mt 5:17, part of the Sermon on the Mount: "[Jesus said.] "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them."

b. These words, or a phrase like them, is inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

Mt 15:4

Mt 15:5

Mt 15:8  
Is 29:13

Mt 5:17

### (2) Interwoven with injustice

And the second subdivision is the part interwoven with the inferior and with injustice, which the savior abolished as being incongruous with his own nature.

*how do you know which is which?*

### (3) Symbolic

33.5.2 Finally, the third subdivision is the symbolic and allegorical part, which is after the image of the superior, spiritual realm: the savior changed (the referent of) this part from the perceptible, visible level to the spiritual, invisible one.

### (1) The decalogue is pure but imperfect

33.5.3 The first, the law of god that is pure and not interwoven with the inferior, is the decalogue or Ten Commandments inscribed on two stone tablets; they divide into the prohibition of things that must be avoided and the commanding of things that must be done. Although they contain pure legislation they do not have perfection, and so they were in need of fulfillment<sup>d</sup> by the savior.

33.6.1  
Ex 20:3  
Ex 34:1

### (2) The lex talionis is interwoven with injustice

33.5.4 The second, which is interwoven with injustice, is that which applies to retaliation and repayment of those who have already committed a wrong, commanding us to pluck out an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth<sup>e</sup> and to retaliate for murder with murder. This part is interwoven with injustice, for the one who is second to act unjustly still acts unjustly, differing only in the relative order in which he acts, and committing the very same act. 33.5.5 But otherwise, this commandment both was and is just, having been established as a deviation from the pure law because of the weakness of those to whom it was ordained; yet it is incongruous with the nature and goodness of the father of the entirety. 33.5.6 Now perhaps this was apt; but even more, it was a result of necessity. For when one who does not wish even a single murder to occur—by saying, "You shall not kill"<sup>f</sup>—when, I say, he ordains a second law and commands the murderer to be murdered, acting as judge between two murders, he who forbade even a single murder has without realizing it been cheated by necessity.<sup>g</sup>

Lv 24:20  
Lv 24:17  
Mt 5:38Ex 20:13  
Ex 21:12  
Lv 24:17

33.5.7 For this reason, then, the son who was sent from him abolished this part of the law, though he admits that it too belonged to god: this part is reckoned as belonging to the old school of thought,<sup>h</sup> both where he says, "For god spoke: 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die'" and elsewhere.<sup>i</sup>

Mt 15:4

c. Or "prefigurative."

d. Or "completion."

e. The phrase is found in Mt 5:38, again in the Sermon on the Mount as above, cf. note 33.5a. In the Old Testament, this commandment is found in Lv 24:20-21, which also specifies death as the penalty for murder, as in the next phrase.

f. One of the Ten Commandments.

g. The so-called necessity he thought to be imposed by the weakness of those to whom the law was ordained (33.4.6) in fact cheats him of his desire that murder should cease.

h. The religion of the Old Testament before the son's advent.

i. The rest of the Matthean passage is quoted above, cf. note 33.4h.

**(3) Ritual law has become symbolic**

33.5.8 And the third subdivision of god's law is the symbolic part, which is after the image of the superior, spiritual realm: I mean, what is ordained about offerings, circumcision, the Sabbath, fasting, Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the like.<sup>j</sup>

33.5.9 Now, once the truth<sup>k</sup> had been manifested, the referent of all these ordinances was changed, inasmuch as they are images and allegories. As to their meaning in the visible realm and their physical accomplishment they were abolished; but as to their spiritual meaning they were elevated, with the words remaining the same but the subject matter being altered. 33.5.10 For the savior commanded us to offer offerings, but not dumb beasts or incense: rather, spiritual praises and glorifications and prayers of thanksgiving, and offerings in the form of sharing and good deeds. 33.5.11 And he wishes us to perform circumcision, but not circumcision of the bodily foreskin, rather of the spiritual heart; 33.5.12 and to keep the Sabbath, for he wants us to be inactive in wicked acts; 33.5.13 and to fast, though he does not wish us to perform physical fasts, rather spiritual ones, which consist of abstinence from all bad deeds.

Rm 2:29  
GTh 53

GTh 27

GTh 6

GTh 14

**The justification for fasting**

Nevertheless, fasting as to the visible realm is observed by our adherents,<sup>m</sup> since fasting, if practiced with reason, can contribute something to the soul, so long as it does not take place in imitation of other people or by habit or because fasting has been prescribed (for)<sup>n</sup> a particular day. 33.5.14 Likewise, it is observed in memory of true fasting, so that those who are not yet able to observe true fasting might have a remembrance of it from fasting according to the visible realm. 33.5.15 Likewise, the apostle Paul makes it clear that Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were images, for he says that "Christ, our paschal lamb, has been sacrificed" and, he says, be without leaven, having no share in leaven—now, by "leaven" he means evil—but rather "be fresh dough."<sup>o</sup>

1Co 5:7

**Summary: (1) The pure but imperfect has been fulfilled**

33.6.1 And so it can be granted that the actual law of god is subdivided into three parts. The first subdivision is the part that was fulfilled<sup>p</sup> by the savior: for "you shall not kill," "you shall not commit adultery," "you shall not swear falsely" are subsumed<sup>q</sup> under not being angry, not looking lustfully at another, and not swearing at all.

33.5.3

Mt 5:21

Mt 5:27

Mt 5:33

**2) The part interwoven with injustice has been abolished**

33.6.2 The second subdivision is the part that was completely abolished, for the commandment of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,"<sup>r</sup>

33.5.4

33.6 a. "fulfilled": i.e. rephrased according to an even more exacting general principle.

b. By Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:21-37), where also the three Old Testament commandments are mentioned.

j. Ritual laws specifically affirming identity as a child of Israel.

k. I.e. the savior and his teaching.

l. Or "literal."

m. I.e. Valentinians.

n. This word is inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

which is interwoven with injustice and itself involves an act of injustice, was abolished by the savior with injunctions to the contrary, 33.6.3 and of two contraries one must "abolish" the other: "For I say to you (pl.), Do not in any way resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you (sing.), turn to him the other cheek also."<sup>s</sup>

Mt 5:39

**(3) The symbolic has been physically abolished**

33.6.4 And the third subdivision is the part whose referent was changed and which was altered from the physical<sup>t</sup> to the spiritual—the allegorical<sup>u</sup> part, which is ordained after the image of the superior realm. 33.6.5 Now, the images and allegories<sup>v</sup> are indicative of other matters, and they were well and good while truth<sup>w</sup> was not present. But now that truth is present, one must do the works of truth and not those of its imagery.

Mt 2:19 par.  
GTh 104**Paul a source of these teachings**

33.6.6 His disciples made these teachings known, and so did the apostle Paul:<sup>x</sup> he makes known to us the part consisting of images, through the passage on the paschal lamb and the unleavened bread, which we have already spoken of.<sup>y</sup> The part consisting of a law interwoven with injustice, he made known by speaking of "abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances"; and the part not interwoven with the inferior, when he says, "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good."<sup>z</sup>

Ep 2:15

Rm 7:12

33.7.1 Thus I think I have shown you, as well as possible in a brief treatment, both that there is human legislation which has been slipped into the law and that the law of god himself divides into three subdivisions.

**3. NATURE OF THE GOD WHO IS AUTHOR OF THE LAW**

33.7.2 Now it remains for us to say what sort of being this god is, who established the law. But this too I believe I have demonstrated to you (sing.) in what I have already said, providing you have followed carefully.

**The lawgiver is an intermediate god**

33.7.3 For since this division of the law (that is, god's own law) was established neither by the perfect god, as we have taught, nor surely by the devil—which it would be wrong to say—then the establisher of this division of the law is distinct from them. 33.7.4 And he is the craftsman and maker of the universe or world and of the things within it. Since he is different from the essences of the other two (and)<sup>a</sup> (rather) is in a state intermediate between them, he would rightfully be described by the term intermediateness.<sup>b</sup>

c. Or "literal."

d. Or "prefigurative."

e. Or "figures."

f. I.e. the savior and his teachings.

g. Valentinians considered Paul to be the ultimate source of their esoteric tradition, cf. PPL.

h. Cf. 33.5.15.

33.7 a. This word is inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

b. He will eventually become the god of the "midpoint," according to IrPt 1.7.1 ("Final repose of the just").

**He is neither good nor evil, merely just**

33.7.5 And if the perfect god is good according to his nature—as indeed he is, for our savior showed that “one only is there who is good,”<sup>c</sup> namely his father whom he manifested—and if furthermore the law belonging to the nature of the adversary is both evil and wicked and is stamped in the mold of injustice, then a being that is in a state intermediate between these and is neither good, nor evil or unjust, might well be properly called just, being a judge of the justice<sup>e</sup> that is his.

Mk 19:17  
VFrH**He is engendered in the image of the good god**

33.7.6 And on the one hand this god must be inferior to the perfect god and less than his righteousness precisely because he is engendered and not unengendered—for “there is one unengendered father, from whom are all things,”<sup>d</sup> or more exactly, from whom all things depend; and on the other hand, he must have come into being as better and more authoritative than the adversary; and must be born of an essence and nature distinct from the essences of the other two. 33.7.7 For the essence of the adversary is both corruption and darkness, for the adversary is material and divided into many parts; while the essence of the unengendered father of the entirety is both incorruptibility and self-existent light,<sup>e</sup> being simple and unique. And the essence of this intermediate produced a twofold capacity,<sup>f</sup> for he is an image of the better god.<sup>g</sup>

1Co 8:6

**D. EPILOGUE****How could the just and the devil derive from the good?**

33.7.8 And now, given that the good by nature engenders and produces the things that are similar to itself and of the same essence, do not be bewildered as to how these natures—that of corruption and (that)<sup>h</sup> of intermediateness—which have come to be different in essence, arose from a single first principle of the entirety, a principle that exists and is confessed and believed in by us,<sup>i</sup> and which is unengendered and incorruptible and good.

IrPt 1.5.4

**Promise of further instruction**

33.7.9 For, god permitting, you will next learn about both the first principle and the generation of these two other gods, if<sup>j</sup> you are deemed worthy of the apostolic tradition,<sup>k</sup> which even we<sup>l</sup> have received by succession; and along with this you will learn how to test all the propositions by means of our savior's teaching.

TRs 49:37  
GPh 83

c. Or “righteousness.”

d. The original text of this passage (1 Co 8:6) says: “For us, there is one god, the father” etc.

e. Cf. BJn 4:9f.

f. Cf. IrPt 1.5.1 (“[I] Animate essence”).

g. With this sentence, Ptolemy begins to speak of the esoteric Valentinian metaphysics, about which he will instruct Flora in the following lesson (cf. 33.7.9).

h. This word is inadvertently omitted in the MSS.

i. I.e. the Valentinians.

j. Or possibly “since.”

k. The esoteric tradition that Valentinians believed had been established by St. Paul, transmitted by him to a certain Theudas, thence to Valentinus, and finally to his successors like Ptolemy.

l. Or “which we too.”

**Conclusion**

33.7.10 I have not failed, my sister Flora, to state these matters to you briefly. And what I have just written is a concise account, though I have treated the subject adequately. In the future these teachings will be of the greatest help to you—at least if, like good rich soil that has received fertile seeds,<sup>m</sup> you bear fruit.

Mk 4:20 par.

m. Cf. IrPt 1.7.5, “The spiritual (elements), which down to this day Achamoth has continued to sow into just souls, learn here; are nourished, for they are sent as

infants; later are deemed worthy of maturity; and are given as brides to the angels of the savior.”