

Ptolemy the Gnostic

Ptolemy's Letter to Flora

The Law was ordained through Moses, my dear sister Flora, has not been understood by many persons, who have accurate knowledge neither of him who ordained it nor of its commandments. I think that this will be perfectly clear to you when you have learned the contradictory opinions about it.

Some say that it is legislation given by God the Father; others, taking the contrary course, maintain stubbornly that it was ordained by the opposite, the Devil who causes destruction, just as they attribute the fashioning of the world to him, saying that he is the Father and maker of this universe. Both are completely in error; they refute each other and neither has reached the truth of the matter.

For it is evident that the Law was not ordained by the perfect God the Father, for it is secondary, being imperfect and in need of completion by another, containing commandments alien to the nature and thought of such a God.

On the other hand, one cannot impute the Law to the injustice of the opposite, God, for it is opposed to injustice. Such persons do not comprehend what was said by the Savior. *For a house or city divided against itself cannot stand* [Matt 12:25], declared our Savior. Furthermore, the apostle says that creation of the world is due to him, for *Everything was made through him and apart from him nothing was made*. [John 1:3] Thus he takes away in advance the baseless wisdom of the false accusers, and shows that the creation is not due to a God who corrupts but to the one who is just and hates evil. Only unintelligent men have this idea, men who do not recognize the providence of the creator and have blinded not only the eye of the soul but also of the body.

From what has been said, it is evident that these persons entirely miss the truth; each of the two groups has experienced this, the first because they do not know the God of justice, the second because they do not know the Father of all, who alone was revealed by him who alone came. It remains for us who have been counted worthy of the knowledge of both these to provide you with an accurate explanation of the nature of the Law and the legislator by whom it was ordained. We shall draw the proofs of what we say from the words of the Savior, which alone can lead us without error to the comprehension of reality.

First, you must learn that the entire Law contained in the Pentateuch of Moses was not ordained by one legislator - I mean, not by God alone, some commandments are Moses', and some were given by other men. The words of the Savior teach us this triple division. The first part must be attributed to God alone, and his legislation; the second to Moses - not in the sense that God legislates through him, but in the sense that Moses gave some legislation under the influence of his own ideas; and the third to the elders of the people, who seem to have ordained some commandments of their own at the beginning. You will now learn how the truth of this theory is proved by the words of the Savior.

In some discussion with those who dispute with the Savior about divorce, which was permitted in the Law, he said *Because of your hard-heartedness Moses permitted a man to divorce his wife; from the beginning it was not so; for God made this marriage, and what the Lord joined together, man must not separate*. [Matt 19:8] In this way he shows there is a Law of God, which prohibits the divorce of a wife from a husband, and another law, that of Moses, which permits the breaking of this yoke because of hard-heartedness. In fact, Moses lays down legislation contrary to that of God; for joining is contrary to not joining.

But if we examine the intention of Moses in giving this legislation, it will be seen that he did not give it arbitrarily or of his own accord, but by the necessity because of the weakness of those for whom the legislation was given. Since they were unable to keep the intention of God, according to which it was not lawful for them to reject their wives, with whom some of them disliked to live, and therefore were in the danger of turning to greater injustice and thence to destruction, Moses wanted to remove the cause of dislike, which was placing them in jeopardy of destruction. Therefore because of the critical circumstances, choosing a lesser evil in place of a greater, he ordained, on his own accord, a second law, that of divorce, so that if they could not observe the first, they might keep this and not turn to unjust and evil actions, through which complete destruction would be the result for them. This was his intention when he gave legislation contrary to that of God. Therefore it is indisputable that here the law of Moses is different from the Law of God, even if we have demonstrated the fact from only one example.

The Savior also makes plain the fact that there are some traditions of the elders interwoven in the Law. *For God, he says, Said, Honour your father and your mother, that it may be well with you, But you*, he says addressing the elders, *...have declared as a gift to God, that by which you have nullified the Law of God through the tradition of your elders.* Isaiah also proclaimed this, saying, *This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, teaching precepts which are the commandments of men.* [Matt 15:4-9].

Therefore it is obvious that the whole Law is divided into three parts; we find in it the legislation of Moses, of the elders, and of God himself. This division of the entire Law, as made by us, has brought to light what is true in it.

This part, the Law of God himself, is in turn divided into three parts: the pure legislation not mixed with evil, which properly called *Law*, which the Savior came not to destroy but to complete [Matt 5:17] -- for what he completed was not alien to him but needed completion, for it did not possess perfection; next the legislation interwoven with the inferiority and injustice, which the Savior destroyed because it was alien to his nature; and finally, the legislation which is allegorical and symbolic, an image of what is spiritual and transcendent, which the Saviour transferred from the perceptible and phenomenal to the spiritual and invisible.

The Law of God, pure and not mixed with inferiority, is the Decalogue, those ten sayings engraved on two tables, forbidding things not to be done and enjoining things to be done. These contains pure but imperfect legislation and required the completion made by the Savior.

There is also the law interwoven with injustice, laid down for vengeance and the requital of previous injuries, ordaining that an eye should be cut out for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and that a murder should be avenged by a murderer. The person who is the second one to be unjust is no less unjust than the first; he simply changes the order of events while performing the same action. Admittedly, this commandment was a just one and still is just, because of the weakness of those for whom the legislation was made so they would not transgress the pure law. But it is alien to the nature and goodness of the Father of all. No doubt it was appropriate to the circumstances, or even necessary; for he who does not want one murder committed, saying, *You shall not kill* and then commanded a murder to be repaid by another murder, has given a second law which enjoins two murders although he had forbidden one. This fact proves that he was unsuspectingly the victim of necessity.

This is why, when his son came, he destroyed this part of the law while admitting that it came from God. He counts this part of the law as in the old religion, not only in other passages but also where he said, *God said, He who curses father or mother shall surely die.*

Finally, there is the allegorical (exemplary) part, ordained in the image of the spiritual and transcendent matters, I mean the part dealing with offerings and circumcision and the sabbath and fasting and

Passover and unleavened bread and other similar matters.

Since all these things are images and symbols, when the truth was made manifest they were translated to another meaning. In their phenomenal appearance and their literal application they were destroyed, but in their spiritual meaning they were restored; the names remained the same but the content was changed. Thus the Savior commanded us to make offerings not of irrational animals or of the incense of this worldly sort, but of spiritual praise and glorification and thanksgiving and of sharing and well-doing with our neighbors. He wanted us to be circumcised, not in regard to our physical foreskin but in regard to our spiritual heart; to keep the Sabbath, for he wishes us to be idle in regard to evil works; to fast, not in physical fasting but in spiritual, in which there is abstinence from everything evil.

Among us external fasting is also observed, since it can be advantageous to the soul if it is done reasonably, not for imitating others or from habit or because of a special day appointed for this purpose. It is also observed so that those who are not yet able to keep the true fast may have a reminder of it from the external fast. Similarly, Paul the apostle shows that the Passover and the unleavened bread are images when he says, *Christ our passover has been sacrificed, in order that you may be unleavened bread, not containing leaven (by leaven he here means evil), but may be a new lump.* [1 Cor 5:7]

Thus the Law of God itself is obviously divided into three parts. The first was completed by the Savior, for the commandment, *You shall not kill, You shall not commit adultery, you shall not swear falsely* are included in the forbidding of anger, desire and swearing. The second part was entirely destroyed, for *An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth* interwoven in with injustice, was destroyed by the Savior through its opposite. Opposites cancel out, *For I say to you, do not resist the evil man, but if anyone strikes you, turn the other cheek to him.*

Finally, there is the part translated and changed from the literal to the spiritual, this symbolic legislation which is an image of transcendent things. For the images and symbols which represent other things were good as long as the Truth has not come; but since the Truth has come, we must perform the actions of the Truth, not those of the image.

The disciples of the Savior and the Apostle Paul showed that this theory is true, speaking of the part dealing with images, as we have already said, in mentioning *The passover for us* and the *Unleavened bread*; for the law interwoven with injustice when he says that *the law of commandments in ordinances were destroyed* [Eph 2:15]; and of that not mixed with anything inferior when he says that *The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good* [Rom 7:12]. I think I have shown you sufficiently, as well as one can in brief compass, the addition of human legislation in the Law and the triple division of the Law of God itself.

It remains for us to say who this God is who ordained the Law; but I think this too has been shown you in what we have already said, if you have listened to it attentively.

For if the Law was not ordained by the perfect God himself, as we have already taught you, nor by the devil, a statement one cannot possibly make, the legislator must be some one other than these two. In fact, he is the demiurge and maker of this universe and everything in it; and because he is essentially different from these two and is between them, he is rightly given the name, *intermediate*.

And if the perfect God is good by nature, in fact he is, for our Savior declared that there is only a single good God, his Father whom he manifested; and if the one who is the opposite nature is evil and wicked, characterized by injustice; then the one situated between the two is neither good nor evil or unjust, but can properly be called just, since he is the arbitrator of the justice which is his.

On the one hand, this god will be inferior to the perfect God and the lower than his justice, since he is generated and not ungenerated -- there is only one ungenerated Father, from whom are all things [1 Cor 8:6], since all things depend on him in their own ways. On the other hand, he will be greater and more

powerful than the adversary, by nature, since he has a substance of either of them. The substance of the adversary is corruption and darkness, for he is material and complex, while the substance of the ungenerated Father of all is incorruption and self-existent light, simple and homogeneous. The substance of the latter produced a double power, while the Savior is an image of the greater one.

And now, do not let this trouble you for the present in your desire to learn how from one first principle of all, simple, and acknowledged by us and believed by us, ungenerated and incorruptible and good, were constituted these natures of corruption and the Middle, which are different substances, although it is characteristic of the good to generate and produce things which are like itself and have the same substance.

For, if God permit, you will later learn about their origin and generation, when you are judged worthy of the apostolic tradition which we too have received by succession. We too are able to prove all our points by the teaching of the Savior.

In making these brief statements to you, my sister Flora, I have not grown weary; and while I have treated the subject with brevity, I have also discussed it sufficiently. These points will be of great benefit to you in the future, if like fair and good ground you have received fertile seeds and go on to show forth their fruit.