In several studies of the early reception of the Fourth Gospel, it is stated that John’s Gospel was first properly accepted and adopted by the Valentinians of whom the first one was Ptolemaeus. Ptolemaeus not only considered the gospel to be apostolic but also wrote a commentary on its prologue some time during the third quarter of the second century. Such statements—based largely on the old paradigm of the early catholic reluctance towards John’s Gospel, as well as on Irenaeus’ description of a Valentinian “model system”—are in need of correction. Ptolemaeus and the Valentinians do not appear to have been the first Christians to accept the Fourth Gospel as apostolic. Instead, it will be argued in this essay that Ptolemaeus adopted his way of using the Fourth Gospel’s prologue as a proof-text for Valentinian theology from an anti-Marcionite Roman discourse from the 150s. This means that the Roman congregations had already accepted the Fourth Gospel by the time Ptolemaeus wrote, and that consequently, Valentinus himself was probably well aware of the gospel. The picture drawn here of Ptolemaeus’ use of the Fourth Gospel will be based primarily on his authentic Letter to Flora, preserved by Epiphanius (Pan. 33.3–7), and secondarily on the Ptolemaean commentary on John’s prologue preserved by Irenaeus (Adv. haer. 1.8.5), whose ascription to Ptolemaeus himself, however, is only stated in the Latin translation of Irenaeus’ text, and is missing from the Greek fragment preserved by Epiphanius. Other examples of Valentinian use of the prologue will be discussed alongside these two primary “Ptolemaean” cases.

1. Ptolemaeus’ Letter to Flora

In this didactic letter, which has been classified either as protreptic\(^2\) or isagogic,\(^3\) and which carefully follows the pattern of Greco-Roman public speeches,\(^4\) Ptolemaeus addresses a woman called Flora and discusses the origin and nature of Mosaic Law. In the introduction and narration parts of the letter, Ptolemaeus introduces two erroneous views concerning the origin of both the law and creation that have been put forward by others—views that derive these from the perfect God and the devil, respectively. He then proceeds (in the specification and argumentation parts of the letter) to show with the words of the Lord (according to Matthew) and the apostles (John and Paul) how these views are wrong, and how his own solution, which traces the law and creation back to an intermediate demiurge, is to be preferred as true apostolic teaching. According to Ptolemaeus, the law is not wholly divine, since Moses and the elders have made additions to it; it its thus tripartite.\(^5\) In addition, the divine portion is itself tripartite as it contains sections that are (1) pure but imperfect, like the Decalogue, and these the Savior came to fulfill; (2) mixed with injustice—based on the principle of revenge out of necessity due to the harshness of people—like the “eye for an eye,” and these the Savior came to destroy; and (3) symbolic, like ritual laws concerning sacrifice and circumcision, and these the Savior transformed as they were no longer adequate except spiritually. Because the law is thus to an extent imperfect and inadequate but also fights evil, it cannot come from the true God who is good, or the devil who is evil, but from a god that is neither good nor evil but just (δίκαιος)—although harsh in his justice.

\(^2\) E.g., Nagel 2000, 294.

\(^3\) Markschies 2000, 229ff.

\(^4\) Dunderberg (2008, 79–80), following Walde’s (1996, 971–974) reconstruction of Greco-Roman public speeches, divides the letter into five parts: (1) Introduction (prooimion/exordium; Pan. 33.3.1); (2) Narration (diēgēsis/narratio; Pan. 33.3.2–7); (3) Specification of the topic (prothesis/divisio; Pan. 33.3.8); (4) Argumentation (pistis/argumentatio; Pan. 33.4.1–7.7); (5) Conclusion (epilogos/conclusio; Pan. 33.7.8–10).

\(^5\) Similar ideas were circulating in the first and second centuries: Philo (Decal. 175–176; Spec. 2.104; Mos. 2.187–191), Justin Martyr (Dial. 44), and the author of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies (2.38,43–44,52; 3.39,47,51) likewise detected human additions and/or less valuable parts in the Mosaic Law (that were added, for example, due to the hard-heartedness of the Jews), although they did not necessarily make the exact tripartite division of Ptolemaeus. See Quispel 1966, 16ff.; Fallon 1976; and Dunderberg 2008, 84–87.