

The Letter of Mara Bar Serapion in Context
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ILARIA L.E. RAMELLI, CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF MILAN, ITALY

A symposium devoted to the enigmatic and much-debated Syriac letter of Mara Bar Serapion to his son was held at Utrecht University on December 10–12 2009. Specialists from various disciplines (Syriac studies, classics, Roman history, New Testament studies, ancient philosophy, Jewish studies, archaeology, and history of ancient religions) from all over the world gathered following the invitation of the two organizers, Prof. Dr. Annette Merz and Dr. Teun Tieleman.

The opening session, in the evening of December 10, was devoted to a general presentation of the forthcoming book of Merz, Tieleman, and Prof. David Rensberger (Atlanta, GA), *The Letter of Mara Bar Serapion*, forthcoming in Tübingen, in Mohr Siebeck's SAPERE series. It will include a new edition of the letter itself with a translation and commentary by Rensberger and interpretive essays by Merz and Tieleman.¹

The group of essays that were presented in the morning of December 11 were thematically related and all of historical nature. Social structure and cultural identity in Commagene, the land of Mara bar Serapion, was the focus of the paper by Dr. Margherita Facella (Pisa). Such an investigation is all the more important in that it is clear that Mara—like Bardaisan, the very next outstanding author in Syriac literature—belonged to the upper class of Commagene. Prof. Dr. Michael A. Speidel (Basel) analyzed the historical circumstances that are reflected in the letter of Mara, in particular the capture of Samosata on the part of the Romans. Such an analysis is crucial also because it is one of the main factors on which the dating of the letter depends. The most probable historical setting is that of the fall of Samosata in A.D. 73, which would place the letter shortly afterwards, unless it is not pseudo-

¹ They have already devoted an article to this letter a couple of years ago: Annette Merz—Teun Tieleman, "The Letter of Mara Bar Serapion: Some Comments on Its Philosophical and Historical Context," in A. Houtman, A. de Jong, M. Misset van de Weg, eds., *Empychoi Logoi. Religious Innovations in Antiquity. Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 107–34.

epigraphical or a rhetorical exercise. Dr. Miguel John Versluys (Leiden) focused on the Romanization of Commagene after the fall of Samosata. This element is indeed reflected in Mara's letter, and Mara's own attitude vis-à-vis this new situation is resumed in his statement, "Let us obey the kingdom that Fate has given us."

The three papers delivered in the afternoon of December 11 dealt more with philosophical issues. Prof. David L. Blank (UCLA) examined the relationship of the letter of Mara to Greek philosophy, concluding that of course this is not a first-rate philosophical treatise and that it is rather closer to Stoic popular philosophy. Some elements in it, such as the attention to a good reputation, would even seem to contradict the Stoic thought. This is what Rensberger also observes in note 58 to his translation. However, rather than contradicting himself in praising "lovers of a good reputation" in § 14, whereas in § 24 he criticizes these same persons, Mara may be explaining—I hypothesize—what it means to be truly and positively lovers of a good reputation: it is to be wise, of course in the Stoic sense, to "choose for oneself something that does not wear out," not to cast blame on God, fate, or anyone, and to lead one's life fearlessly and joyfully. The negative sense of seeking glory and reputation from fellow-humans is used in the other places, whereas here the true and positive sense is given.

Anna Ntinti, MPhil (Utrecht), starting from the motif of the death of three philosophers (Socrates, Pythagoras, and the "wise king of the Jews") in Mara's letter, proposed a reading of the traditions of the death of Plato. She highlighted the variety of accounts in the biographical and doxographical traditions and showed their interrelationships. Em. Prof. Dr. Pancratius C. Beentjes (Tilburg) offered a detailed and stimulating paper in which he highlighted all the affinities between the letter of Mara bar Serapion and Semitic Wisdom literature. His argument, which was convincing, seems to me not at all at odds with the presence of philosophical themes in the letter of Mara. The integration of wisdom traditions of various peoples was in fact a typical feature in Neostoicism (see, for instance, Chaeremon, who allegorized Egyptian religious traditions, and references in Cornutus, both of them probably very close to Mara also from the chronological point of view).

In the morning of December 12 three other essays were presented. Dr. Michael Blömer (Münster) offered a rich

archaeological report concerning the evidence of religious life in Commagene in the first century A.D., paying special attention to the cultic reform of Antiochus I. But references ranged from the Iron Age to the Luvian period to Late Antiquity and the XIII centuries. The quality, interest, and relevance of the displayed images was also high. Prof. Dr. Albert de Jonge (Leiden), starting from the way in which Mara speaks of God and the gods in his letter, reflected on the religious language of belonging, with particular focus on Iranian religion. As he rightly observed, Iranian elements seem to be absent from the letter of Mara. Ilaria Ramelli (Milan), who during the last dozen years has devoted essays and a chapter to the letter,² also providing the first Italian translation of it, was invited to offer comments on Rensberger's Syriac edition, translation, and commentary. Given that the book has not yet appeared, she was glad that these will serve as suggestions. Prof. Ramelli, who agrees with Rensberger, Tieleman, and Merz on the early dating of the letter and its Stoic traits, expressed an overall very positive evaluation of Rensberger's work. She pointed out many convergences between his and her own version and interpretation of the letter, and the importance of many linguistic and philological elements (e.g., the frequent use of the absolute state and of words and forms unattested elsewhere, or scribal mistakes that can have occurred only in a square Aramaic/Palmyrene script) that indicate that the letter represents the first extant Syriac literary document. She suggested to use and include references to Michael Sokoloff's new edition of Brockelmann's lexicon (Gorgias/Eisenbrauns, 2009) in the notes, besides Brockelmann's original edition and Payne Smith (*maior* and *minor*), and to employ the Vetus Syra in addition to the Peshitta for parallels with the New Testament, given that the Old Syriac version

² "Stoicismo e Cristianesimo in area siriana nella seconda metà del I secolo d.C.," *Sileno* 25 (1999) 197–212; "La lettera di Mara Bar Serapion" (Stylos, 13 [2004]), 77–104; "Gesù tra i sapienti greci perseguitati ingiustamente in un antico documento filosofico pagano di lingua siriana" (Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica, 97 [2005]), 545–70; *Stoici romani minori*, critical essays, editions and translations, commentaries, apparatuses, and bibliographies (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), Appendix: Mara bar Serapion (2555–2598), reviewed by Gretchen Reydam-Schils, BMCR 2009 <http://bmcr.brynmawr.edu/2009/2009-10-10.html>.

is much closer to Mara's time than the Peshitta. Ramelli offered many suggestions for the improvement of the edition, translation, and commentary in numerous respects, from the philological to the rhetorical and the philosophical point of view (including parallels to Roman Stoicism). I only cite very few instances, such as the addition of titles and breaks in the translation and of references to close parallels in the *Liber Legum Regionum* in the commentary, the use of a "verse" structure to render parallel *kola* not only in the places in which Rensberger has employed it, but also in others in which the same structure is detectable, several alternative renderings of controversial points in the letter, some textual emendations, and translations and interpretations that reveal precise Stoic philosophical doctrines.³

The essay by em. Prof. Dr Pieter W. van der Horst (Zeist) was unfortunately read *in absentia*; thus, it was impossible to discuss it with him, which would have been very fruitful, also given the interest of the essay and its divergent conclusions vis-à-vis the dating proposed by Tieleman, Merz, and Rensberger. Van der

³ I cite only one example of the last kind. At the end of § 28, Rensberger translates: "instead of rage, obey graciously." Now, I find that he is right to criticise the interpretation "instead of obey rage, obey virtue," since if "virtue" is the direct object of "obey" it should be introduced by a Δ rather than a Ξ, like here. This is why he translates adverbially: "obey in kindness" > "obey graciously." This is correct, but I think that Mara is exhorting his son to "obey in virtue rather than obeying in rage/anger," that is, "obey with virtue rather than obeying with anger," i.e.: "instead of obeying angrily, obey virtuously." The first two words of the sentence, literally meaning "instead of anger," must be resolved as follows: "instead of (obeying with) anger." I prefer this translation, which is perfectly plausible from the grammatical point of view, because it expresses an important tenet of Stoicism: the wise must accept, and thus obey, fate, with a voluntary adhesion, in virtue, not against his will (*fac nollem, comitabor gemens*), in vice: *Duc o parens celsique dominator poli / quocumque placuit; nulla parendi mora est. / Adsum impiger: fac nolle, comitabor gemens, / malusque patiar quod pati licuit bono. / Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt* (Cleanthes translated by Seneca, *Ep.* 107.10). The one who obeys voluntarily is virtuous, *bonus*; the one who obeys against his will, in anger and sadness, *gemens*, is in vice: *malus*. This is exactly the fully Stoic conception that underlies Mara's exhortation: "instead of obeying angrily, obey virtuously."

Horst proposes an inspiring comparison between Mara's letter and Boethius' *Consolatio*, both read as consolation works written in prison, and advocates a dating of Mara's letter to the third-fourth century. He is also inclined to see Mara as a Christian—mainly for his interpretation of the destruction of Jerusalem as a punishment for the killing of Jesus—and to play down his philosophical standing, which is evaluated more positively by Merz and Tieleman.

In addition to that of van der Horst, other interesting contributions in the afternoon of December 12 were offered by Prof. Dr. Petr Pokorny (Prague), who specifically examined the "intention" of the letter of Mara bar Serapion, and by drs. Martin Ruf (Utrecht), who offered an original reading of the letter of Mara and the conception of the "world" that emerges from it in a comparison with the notion of "world" that is found in Peter (error, pollution, and corruption). If the early dating of the letter of Mara is right, this approach seems to be all the more sound in that the letter would prove broadly contemporary with the New Testament.

The organization itself was very good, just as the overall quality of the contributions. It is to be hoped that both the volume by Tieleman, Merz, and Rensberger and the proceedings of the conference will appear soon. These two works will undoubtedly be a point of reference for all the scholars who will approach and examine the letter of Mara Bar Serapion.