Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman, eds., *The Letter of Mara bar Sarapion in Context: Proceedings of the Symposium Held at Utrecht University 10–12 December 2009*, Culture and History of the Ancient Near East 58 (Leiden: Brill, 2012). Pp. xiv + 245; €117.

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This collection of conference papers[1] constitutes a fairly diverse array of approaches and opinions about an intriguing little document that is among the earliest Syriac compositions. The *Letter of Mara bar Sarapion* purports to be a father's letter of advice to his young son, in which he encourages him to pursue wisdom, learning, and virtue, and to avoid anxiety over possessions. A few allusions to siege, captivity, and exile have tempted scholars to seek a precise historical setting. A vague reference to a "wise king" of the Jews has added to the interest. Published in 1855 by William Cureton in his *Spicilegium Syriacum*, it received a modicum of attention from Syriac scholars in the following decades. Since Samosata and Seleucia are mentioned in the *Letter*, Cureton briefly considered whether the first-century Roman conquest of Commagene (and its capital, Samosata) might provide its historical context but found a late second-century date more plausible. In a review of Cureton's initial publication of Mara's text, Ewald returned to the discussion of the late first century and specifically to Josephus' account (BJ 7.1–3) of the Roman capture of Samosata as an anchor for dating Mara's *Letter* in the late 70's CE.[2] Schulthess, on the other hand, accepted Cureton's general chronological framework and situated Mara more broadly in a Stoic context.[3] Nearly a century later I placed Mara's *Letter* into the context of Greco-Roman literature of consolation, and I argued that the trope of "persecution of the wise" emerged from Greco-Roman philosophical arguments on providence to be adapted and adopted into early Christian apologetic literature; on this basis I argued the *Letter* should be seen as a literary construct and that the implicit anti-Judaic argument of

[1] See Ilaria Ramelli's report on the conference in *Hugoye* 13 (2010), 81–85.

[2] H. Ewald, "Review of Cureton, *Spicilegium Syriacum*," in *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen* 1 (1856), 649–66.

[3] F. Schulthess, "Der Brief des Mara bar Sarapion," *ZDMG* 51 (1897), 381–91.

the passage on the "wise king" of the Jews pointed to a Christian author, probably of the fourth century. [4]

After fifteen years of silence, vigorous discussion of the date and nature of the document as well as the convictions of its author ensued; in recent decades some New Testament scholars have accepted it as a first-century, non-Christian, Stoic testimony to Jesus.[5] That is the view held by the editors of the volume under review, and it is generally treated as the *consensus ante symposium* and thus the starting point for many of the essays within. The collection begins with a "General Introduction" by the editors, Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman: a brief overview of the *Letter*'s content, of the famous manuscript (BL Add 14658) in which it is preserved, of the scholarship on the *Letter*, and of the essays presented in this volume.

Four essays endeavor to situate the *Letter* in the context of first-century Commagene, a kingdom that emerged in about the mid second century BCE as the Seleucid Empire frayed, a domain eventually absorbed as a Roman province over the course of the first century CE. Its cultural footprint has often been discerned from the monumental royal cult site of Nemrud Dağ, designed by Antiochos I (70–36 BCE) to combine Persian and Greek religious traditions. These informative and stimulating essays provide a rich discussion of the history, monuments, epigraphic and numismatic evidence before turning to Mara's *Letter*. Yet each concedes that situating Mara's *Letter* in this Commagenian context poses as many difficulties as it solves.

In "Making use of History beyond the Euphrates: Political Views, Cultural Traditions, and Historical Contexts in the Letter of Mara bar Sarapion," Michael A. Speidel poses the question whether "the enigmatic scraps of information in this text" can be reconciled with "a known historical setting and with the cultural setting" the

[4] K. E. McVey, "A Fresh Look at the Letter of Mara bar Sarapion," in René Lavenant, ed., *V Symposium Syriacum Leuven 1988*, OCA 236 (1990), 257–72.

[5] For an overview of this discussion see K. E. McVey, "The *Letter of Mara bar Serapion to his Son* and the Second Sophistic: Palamedes and the 'Wise King of the Jews'," *Syriac Encounters: Papers from the Sixth North American Syriac Symposium, Duke University, 26–29 June 2011*, ed. M. Doerfler, E. Fiano, and K. Smith, Eastern Christian Studies 20 (Louvain: Peeters, 2015), 305–26, esp. 305–311.

Letter seems to presuppose (12). After an extensive consideration of Mara's *Letter* both in relation to the first-century historical sources and alongside the earliest Syriac literature, he concludes that it "should be read with two major historical contexts in mind": "The *Letter* with its references to Samosata and to 'His Majesty' clearly presents a first-century Commagenian context… On the other hand, the *Letter*, as a literary composition,…probably tells us…how certain Osrhoenians tried to cope with Roman occupation and the early stages of direct Roman rule in their country." (41)

In "Cultural Responses from Kingdom to Province: The Romanisation of Commagene, Local Identities and the Mara bar Sarapion Letter" Miguel John Versluys seeks to evaluate a claim made earlier by Merz and Tieleman: that Mara's *Letter* attests the disappointment of the Commagenian ruling elite in the religious reforms represented by the cultic site of Nemrud Dağ.[6] He approaches his subject in three stages. In the first, he examines the archeological and historical evidence for a distinctive Commagenian identity in the century preceding the Roman "annexation" in 72/73; he concludes "that there is little, if any, unambiguous evidence for the existence of a distinct local or religious Commagenian identity in the Imperial era." (58) In the second, he considers the case of cosmopolitan ruling elites from parts of the Roman Empire remote from Commagene – the Icenians and the Batavians; his result here strengthens the earlier conclusion: "the Romans actively used what we could call 'invented ethnicities' for their own political and strategic reasons." Scholars have been influenced by nineteenth-century colonialism and by the Roman Jewish War to look for similar phenomena elsewhere in the Roman Empire's subjugated "peoples." Finally, looking at Mara's *Letter*, he finds insufficient historical detail to place it with confidence in the Commagenian context in 72/73.

In "Religious Life of Commagene in the Late Hellenistic and Early Roman Period" Michael Blömer begins with Mara's apparent allusion to ancestral gods and the assumption that "Samosata, the Commagenian capital" is his "hometown." He examines the evi-

[6] Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman, "The Letter of Mara bar Sarapion: Some Comments on its Philosophical and Historical Context," in *Empsychoi Logoi – Religious Innovations in Antiquity: Studies in Honour of Pieter Willem van der Horst*, ed. Alberdina Houtman, Albert de Jong, and Magda Misset-van de Weg (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 107–33, esp. 122–23, 133.

dence for (and against) the common assumption that Commagene was a center for Iranian-Greek religious syncretism. Rather than the ruler cult of the Hellenistic elites at Nemrud Dağ, he seeks a connection to popular religion. This quest is impeded by the loss of Samosata as an archaeological site with the building of the Atatürk reservoir; what has been salvaged there points more to Greek culture among the elite (99–101). Looking more broadly at Commagene, he finds evidence of continuity of religious sites from the Iron Age and continuity with Syro-Hittite iconographic traditions—attesting a "pantheon in Hittite tradition with some Aramaic influence" which "correlates to what is known from neighboring Syro-Hittite kingdoms in North Syria." (103) For example, at Arsameia on the Euphrates, at Ancoz (Eskitaş), Boybeypınarı (and Çaputlu Ağaç), the Damlıca caves, and the sanctuary in the Dülük Baba Tepesi mountains near Doliche. He concludes: "We find continuity from the Iron Age to the Roman period, a continuity most discernible in the fields of landscape archaeology, religion, funerary rites and language. However, only occasionally do we catch a glimpse of the Luwian and Aramaic remnants under their Hellenised cloak." (128) The reader must infer how this broad background relates to Mara's *Letter*; perhaps it is a glimpse of the Aramaic past.

Two essays attempt to situate the ideas in Mara's *Letter* in religious or philosophical systems other than those proposed in the past (popular Greek philosophy, mainly Stoicism, Greco-Roman rhetoric). Albert de Jong, "Mara's God(s) and Time" makes a compelling case that students of Near Eastern culture in the first centuries CE should give serious and precise attention to the possibility of Parthian cultural influence; here he mentions the *Hymn of the Pearl* in the *Acts of Thomas* and Josephus' account of the conversion of Adiabene. Since the *Letter* seems an apt candidate for this kind of study, he sets out to explore connections suggested earlier by Merz and Tieleman[7] and by Rensberger.[8] He concludes, however, that, "not only does the text seem…to be of purely

[7] Ibid., 113–14.

[8] David Rensberger, "Reconsidering the *Letter* of Mara bar Serapion," in *Aramaic in Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Eric M. Meyers and Paul V.M. Flesher (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2010), 3–21, esp. 14–18.

Greek derivation, it actually contains a few statements that go *against* some of the most important Parthian institutions." Examples given are the esteem for written literature vs. professional singers, and the apparent surprise at the custom of fostering one another's children—a practice common among Parthian nobility. Comparison of Zurvan with the concept of time (*zabna*) in Mara is also inconclusive since the "discussion of Zurvanism in general must be reopened and…as long as the subject has not really found a balanced treatment, it will be difficult to use it for the interpretation of Mara's *Letter*." (152)

In "Where is Wisdom to be Found? A Plea in Favor of Semitic Influences in the *Letter* of Mara bar Sarapion," Pancratius C. Beentjes follows up on Rensberger's suggestion that Near Eastern wisdom traditions be utilized to widen the *Letter*'s intellectual context beyond Stoicism and other Hellenistic Greek philosophic traditions.[9] In Proverbs, the Wisdom of ben Sira, and Qoheleth, for example, he notes themes shared with Mara, such as the pursuit of wisdom, the transience of wealth, the importance of friendship, the praise of virtue, and the help of God.

Margherita Facella in "Languages, Cultural Identities and Elites in the Land of Mara bar Sarapion" explores the epigraphic and numismatic evidence from Commagene in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Although Greek inscriptions and coins attest the use of Greek among the royalty and other elites in the Hellenistic period, no evidence has been found to substantiate the presumption that Aramaic or any other languages were used by a broader swath of the populace. Mara's *Letter* itself and Lucian of Samosata's writings may provide evidence of the use of Aramaic/Syriac combined with Greek learning. Facella ends with the parallel between Jesus and Socrates implied by Mara and explicit in Lucian's *Peregrinus*; here she notes that if Mara's *Letter* dates to the first century, it would be first to draw this parallel, before even Justin Martyr; this she finds implausible.

Two more essays give particular attention to Mara's apparent allusion to the teaching and death of Jesus. In "Jesus as the Ever-Living Lawgiver in the *Letter* of Mara bar Sarapion," Petr Pokorny proposes that this is "not a historically authentic document but rather a parenetic text intended to address the young

[9] Ibid., 7, 19.

Syrian generation in the first decades of Roman rule." (133) He argues that the writing resonates with Matthean theology and may have roots in earlier *logia*; thus, it constitutes "an intriguing echo of Jesus' teaching and life story in second-century Syria among people who were not educated in biblical traditions." (138–39)

In "The Death(s) of Plato" Anna Ntinti seeks to set into broader context Mara's alignment of the deaths of Socrates, Pythagoras, and the "wise king" of the Jews. Death is, she observes, an important focal point in ancient biography in general and particularly in the lives of philosophers. After noting the Socratic origin of this trope, she turns to the varied traditions pertaining to Plato's death for a more detailed discussion. This is presented more as general background to Mara's *Letter* rather than as directly pertinent to its details or to previous scholarly discussion.

Two essays continue the effort to set Mara's *Letter* into a broader Greco-Roman literary and philosophical context. In his essay, "Mara bar Sarapion and Greek Philosophy," David Blank briefly revisits questions of literary genre before embarking upon a close comparison of Mara with the Stoics on a few interrelated issues: the unbridled pursuit of wealth and eradication of the passions, wandering in error, the importance of reputation, and providence and the suffering of wise men. Despite many similarities, he concludes that "a reader versed in Stoic philosophy may find Mara's letter rather a dog's dinner, that is, a confused jumble" (182). It is a "vision based on a fundamentally Socratic world-view, [a view which] …was given its clearest form and its most comprehensive conceptualisation by the Stoics. But what Mara tells his son does not include any of this conceptualisation, nor is it restricted to Stoic doctrines. His advice is based rather upon his experience and general culture, filtered through a good general understanding of philosophy, some of which is Stoic." (180).

Pieter W. van der Horst begins his "Consolation from Prison: Mara bar Sarapion and Boethius" with a few ancient examples of letters from prison—Paul, Ignatius, the spurious seventh epistle of Socrates—but he finds the closest parallel to Mara in Boethius. Further consideration leads him to conclude that the *Letter* is more likely a third or fourth-century work mainly due to the implicit anti-Judaism of the famous "wise king" passage.[10]

[10] For the same reasons argued in McVey, "A Fresh Look," 266–69.

Finally, Ilaria L. E. Ramelli in "Mara bar Sarapion: Comments on the Syriac Edition, Translation, and Notes by David Rensberger" discusses many questions of textual, literary, and historical significance; it will be more feasible to address them when Rensberger's annotated translation appears (expected in the Mohr-Siebeck SAPERE series).

On the whole, these are stimulating and informative essays. Yet many of them have little to say directly about Mara's *Letter*; in those that discuss this text in detail the reader is hampered by the absence of the new translation on which they are based (especially Blank and Ramelli). Finally, it is worth noting that all seem to have begun with the presumption that the *Letter* should be seen as a straightforward historical witness to life in first-century Commagene, but many conclude that it is more probably a rhetorical construct with dense yet imperfect parallels to Greco-Roman literature and philosophy, and that it is likely to have originated in second to fourth-century Osrhoene. A full engagement with the earlier scholarship on these matters remains a *desideratum*. Nonetheless, students of the earliest Syriac literature will find this a very engaging collection.