



Mara Bar-Serapion

Preface from William Cureton's *Spicilegium Syriacum*

We have no information respecting this author beyond what is supplied in the letter itself addressed to his son. Mara, or as Assemani writes it in Latin, Maras, is not an uncommon appellation amongst the Syrians, and there have been many who have borne the name of Serapion.

The author speaks of himself as one whose city had been ruined, and himself also taken and detained as prisoner in bonds by the Romans, together with others whom the victors treated in a tyrannical manner, as distrustful of their fidelity to the Roman government. He describes the misery of his friends and companions belonging to the city of Samosata, and the distresses which he and they suffered when they joined themselves together on the road to Seleucia. He alludes to the destruction of Jerusalem and the dispersion of the Jews as an act of divine vengeance for their having murdered Jesus; but he makes no direct mention of the name of Christ, and only designates him as the "wise king," who, although put to death, still lived in the "wise laws which he promulgated."

From these facts it is evident that the author wrote at a time when the Romans not long before had been making fresh conquests, or repressing rebellion in the parts of Syria about Samosata and Seleucia, and probably at a period when, on account of the persecution of the Christians, it would not have been prudent or safe to have spoken in more direct terms of Christ. Comagena and its capital Samosata were taken by the Romans in the reign of Vespasian, A.D. 72, or two years after the capture of Jerusalem by Titus. About twenty-three years later the persecution under Domitian began, A.D. 95. There would be nothing therefore incongruous in assigning, from its internal evidence, the date of this Epistle to the close of the first century. Nor would the allusion to the catastrophe of Samos at all militate against this, if it be referred to the earthquake in the reign of Augustus, from which several of the neighbouring islands also suffered.

The mention, however, of that island having been covered with sand, as a punishment for the burning of Pythagoras, seems to me to have a direct reference to the Sibylline verses; "I cannot therefore, in my own mind, come to any other conclusion than that this Epistle ought to be assigned to a period when the Sibylline verses were frequently cited, the age of Justin Martyr, Meliton, and Tertullian. This date, too, will perhaps otherwise coincide quite as well with what is read in the letter as the former. The troubles to which the writer alludes as having befallen himself and his city will apply to those inflicted by the Romans upon the countries about the Tigris and Euphrates which had been excited to rebel against them by Vologeses, in the Parthian war under the command of Lucius Verus, A.D. 162-165. I have not found the name of Samosata especially mentioned as having suffered more than other cities in this war; but it is stated that Seleucia was sacked and burned by the Romans, and five or six thousand slain. The persecution under Marcus Antoninus followed very close upon this war, and as these facts equally agree with the allusions made in this Epistle of Mara, it may perhaps be nearer the truth to assign its date to the latter half of the second century rather than to the close of the first.

If indeed such be the period at which this Letter was written, there is no improbability in supposing,

that the Serapion, to whom it is addressed, may be the same as he who succeeded Maximinus as eighth Bishop of Antioch, about the year 190, and who himself also wrote short epistles, similar to this in purpose and tendency, for which indeed his father's might have set him a pattern.

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