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The Theory of Disasters in the Letter of Mara Bar Serapion: Competition within Philosophical and Religious Doctrines of Disasters?

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Religious and Philosophical Competition in Early Imperial Times: The Case of Theories of Disasters

Religious competition in antiquity relates to a number of topics and issues, also sometimes connecting to philosophical competition. One of these consists in theories of disasters, both individual and collective, and responses to them, offered by various religious and philosophical movements. Within this framework, this investigation intends to contribute to enlightening popular philosophical and religious theories of disasters in Roman imperial times. The case study chosen for the present essay is a Stoicizing document of, apparently, a Syrian Hellenized author of the Roman imperial times. It is the Letter of Mara Bar Serapion (or Sarapion) to his son, whose dating is problematic. It may have been composed towards the end of the first century (the 70s CE), after the capture of Samosata by the Romans, which is alluded to in the text, although there are also proposals for a later dating. In the present examination, we can leave aside the issue of dating, which in any case belongs to the Roman imperial period, and focus on an investigation into competing religious and philosophical theories of disasters, both individual and collective alike.¹

The Case Study: Mara's Letter to His Son

¹ I am very grateful to the audiences of invited lectures at various Universities, especially in Rome, Utrecht, and Claremont, where I presented ideas related to this article, for the stimulating discussions. Warmest thanks to the editors of *JRCA* for inviting me to contribute an essay to this exciting journal.

What is important to remark here in connection with Christianity is that this letter was of the highest interest to Christians in late antiquity, as the manuscript that preserves it also indicates (seventh-century Cod. Syr. Add. 14568). This ms. also includes texts that are relevant to the relation between Christianity and Greek philosophy and culture (which is pivotal, in turn, in the study of religious competition in imperial and late antiquity²): the *Liber legum regionum* from the school of Bardaisan, Melito's *Apology* in Syriac, and Ambrose's *Hypomnemata*, the Syriac version of a brief Greek apology attributed to Justin Martyr.

This interest in Christian circles is easily explained if one considers the context of Mara Bar Serapion's letter itself, with its presentation of Jesus' unjust death along with those of Socrates and Pythagoras, and the disasters that these deeds gave rise to for whole peoples as a consequence of theodicy. "The king of the Jews" (as he is styled here), most probably identifiable with Jesus, was put to death unjustly. This had serious repercussions for the whole people, who were soon after deprived of their kingdom and suffered the destruction of both Jerusalem and the Temple. Parallel analyses of the connection between these historical facts will also be taken into account in the present essay. The philosophical theorization of disasters and their relation to the divine in Mara's Letter will be examined against the background of Stoicism.

This is, indeed, one of the many elements that point to a Stoic context of the ideas expressed in this very interesting but also mysterious document. The letter at stake is likely to belong to the first literary and philosophical, or popular philosophical, witnesses we know in Syriac, along with Bardaisan of Edessa (and his school).³ Mara Bar Serapion's letter is extant in Syriac and was probably composed by an upper-class Stoic or Stoicizing author from Commagene, who was a prisoner of the Romans in the 70s of the first century CE, after these had captured Samosata. The dating of this letter is debated, however, as mentioned in the introduction: it is mostly dated from the late first century CE to the fourth or later.⁴ However, since Mara probably influenced Aphrahat, like Bardaisan, his letter must have been in circulation at least in the time of Aphrahat, ca. 270–345, thus

² See the SBL unit, Religious Competition in Late Antiquity, and the panels, discussions, and publications it promotes, including *Religious Competition in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. Nathaniel P. DesRosiers and Lily C. Vuong (Atlanta: SBL, 2016; Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplements 10).

³ My "Mara bar Serapion, Letter of," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, 3 vols., ed. Angelo Di Berardino (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2014), 2:668-669. On Bardaisan, see my *Bardaisan of Edessa: A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation* (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2009); "Bardaisan (Philosopher and Poet)," in *Brill Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, eds. David Hunter et al. (Leiden, Brill, 2021), online <https://brill.com/view/db/eeco>; *Bardaisan on Human Nature, Fate, and Freewill: The Book of the Laws of Countries* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming).

⁴ Discussion in my "Mara Bar Serapion, Letter," in *Encyclopaedia of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Daniel M. Gurtner (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 455.

around 300 CE.⁵ I suspect it may be even much earlier, both for historical and for linguistic and philological reasons.

According to Chin,⁶ this letter is a rhetorical exercise in the *χρεια* tradition, described in the handbooks of rhetoric of Theon and Libanius; in this perspective, the letter has no historical value, nor does it document even a popular form of Stoicism. It is rather evidence of the diffusion of Greek rhetoric in late antique Syriac literature. Chin is induced to read Mara's letter in this way by the short section that, in the manuscript, comes after the letter and is indeed a *χρεια*, a witty sentence of Mara in his answer to a question, in conformity with a question-and-answer literary typology.⁷ For Chin, the letter of Mara is simply a development of the brief final *χρεια*; it is itself a rhetorical exercise. On this account, the letter should date to a period in which Greek *paideia* had entered the curriculum of studies in Syriac culture, therefore the fifth or sixth centuries.

Yet, it is not at all certain that Mara's letter simply developed from the *χρεια* appended to it. Nor do we know whether the *χρεια* was written by the same author as the letter itself, so that the letter and the *χρεια* together should be regarded as constituting a single document. Assuming that they must be taken together, it is unsure whether the *χρεια* inspired the letter, or the reverse. Indeed, the letter may be earlier and the *χρεια* may have arisen from it as a rhetorical exercise. An example, roughly contemporary to the setting of Mara's letter, seems to me relevant and illuminating: that of the pseudepigraphic correspondence between the Roman Stoic Musonius Rufus and Apollonius of Tyana. This seems to be a rhetorical exercise and does not belong to Musonius' philosophical diatribes,⁸ which are surely authentic, although they were reported by his disciple Lucius. As all scholars agree, these diatribes reflect Musonius' Stoic teaching.

In the case of the Musonius (almost coeval with the high dating of Mara's letter), the pseudepigraphic letters purportedly exchanged between Musonius and Apollonius cannot be considered as the piece from which Musonius' diatribes originated—rather, the

5 Ilaria Ramelli, "Revisiting Aphrahat's Sources: Beyond Scripture?," *Parole de l'Orient* 41 (2015): 367-397.

6 Catherine Chin, "Rhetorical Practice in the Chreia Elaboration of Mara bar Sarapion," *Hugoye* 9.2 (2006): §§ 1–24.

7 E.g. Gustav Bardy, "La littérature patristique des 'questions' de l'Écriture," *RB* 41(1932): 210-236; Lorenzo Perrone, "Quaestiones et responsiones in Origene," *CrSt* 15 (1994): 1-50; Margaret Mitchell, "Problems and Solutions in Early Christian Biblical Interpretation," *Adamantius* 22 (2016): 40-55; Pierluigi Piovanelli, "Entre oralité et (ré)écriture. Le genre des erotapokriseis dans les dialogues apocryphes de Nag Hammadi," in Idem, *Apocryphités: Études sur les textes et les traditions scripturaires du judaïsme et du christianisme anciens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 295-301.

8 See my *Musonio Rufo* (Milan: Bompiani, 2001) and *Stoici romani minori* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 689–943; Valéry Laurand, *Stoïcisme et lien social: Enquête autour de Musonius Rufus* (Paris: Garnier, 2014).

reverse. In the same way, the $\chi\rho\epsilon\iota\alpha$ on Mara may well have been written later than his letter, whose linguistic and philosophical features point to an early date and perfectly correspond to the historical framework in which it is set, as I have argued.⁹ Also, the philosophical elements in Mara's letter are not so generic as to be impossible to relate to a philosophical school, as Chin maintains. I rather pointed out close similarities between Mara's letter and Stoicism, especially themes of Roman Stoicism, as we shall see; the same emerges from Tieleman's observations on the letter.¹⁰

Religion and Philosophy: Jesus as Persecuted Philosopher, and Stoicism

This letter was interesting for Christian authors because of its mention of Jesus Christ, "the wise king of the Jews," together with Socrates and Pythagoras. The author identifies Jesus as one of several unjustly persecuted philosophers, who were later vindicated by divine providence.¹¹ If the letter stems from the first or second century, as I deem possible, this would be one of the first presentations of Christ—together with those of the Christian Justin Martyr and of the "pagan" Lucian—as a philosopher: he is even assimilated to the most important Greek philosophers.¹²

From the philosophical point of view, it contains many Stoicizing elements. This is why I included Mara within a systematic treatment of the Roman Stoics.¹³ This line of

9 Ilaria Ramelli, "Gesù tra i sapienti greci perseguitati ingiustamente in un antico documento filosofico pagano di lingua siriana," with translation of the Syriac letter of Mara Bar Serapion, *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica* 97 (2005) 545-570; *Stoici romani minori* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 2555-2598, received by Nathanael J. Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity: Networks and the Movement of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 279.

10 Ramelli, "Stoici Romani"; "Mara Bar Serapion's Letter: Comments on the Syriac Edition, Translation, and Notes by David Rensberger," in *The Letter of Mara bar Serapion in Context*, ed. Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman (Leiden, Brill, 2012), 205-231, reviewed by Johannes van Oort, *Vigiliae Christianae* 67 (2013): 574; Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman, "The Letter of Mara Bar Serapion; Some Comments on Its Philosophical and Historical Context," in *Empsykhoi logoi. FS Van der Horst*, ed. Albert de Jong et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 107-33.

11 See my "Gesù tra i sapienti greci."

12 A discussion of these presentations I offered in "Ethos and Logos: A Second-Century Apologetical Debate between 'Pagan' and Christian Philosophers," *Vigiliae Christianae* 69.2 (2015): 123-156; "Lucian's Peregrinus as Holy Man and Charlatan," in *Holy Men/Women and Charlatans in the Ancient Novel, Proceedings of RICAN 6*, ed. Michael Paschalis, Gareth Schmeling, and Stelios Panayotakis (Groningen: Barkhuis-Groningen University Library, 2015), 105-120.

13 *Stoici romani*, 2555-2598, reviewed by Gretchen Reydams-Schils, (*Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2009); referred to in Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Studies in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill 2014), 214; Marcelo Boeri - Ricardo Salles, *Los filósofos estoicos: Ontología, lógica, física, y ética* (Sankt Augustin: Academia, 2014), 817; Jörg Rüpke, *Il crocevia del*

the Stoicizing thought of Mara Bar Serapion was taken over by Annette Merz and Teun Tieleman.¹⁴ I also devoted an article to Mara and his relation to Stoicism, with new arguments both on Stoicism and on the early dating of the letter, in a Brill volume devoted to Mara, which was also meant as a preparation of the critical edition and translation by David Rensberger.¹⁵ The latter is another supporter of the early dating of the letter, mainly on the basis of linguistic and palaeographical arguments, which point to an early, Palmyrene-type of script (as revealed by the errors in the manuscript) and an archaic (Aramaic) linguistic usage.

This position was recently embraced also by George van Kooten, who refers to the early dating of Mara's letter as follows: "if indeed—as scholars such as Sebastian Brock, Fergus Millar, Craig A. Evans and Ilaria Ramelli have argued—the letter from the Syrian Stoic philosopher Mara Bar Serapion was ... written by a pagan and can be dated to the end of the first century CE."¹⁶

Theories of Individual and Collective Disasters and Wisdom Lore: Comparisons with Josephus and Bardaisan (Hellenistic Judaism and Syriac Hellenized Christianity)

Mara offers examples of wise men who were persecuted and killed unjustly, and whose persecutors, in this case whole peoples, were punished by the divinity in its justice (§ 18), in accord with the philosophical argument supporting collective punishments and deaths.¹⁷ Wise, virtuous persons unjustly put to death constituted already a widespread topic in Greco-Roman philosophical literature: for instance, the Neocademic Cicero, strongly influenced by Stoicism, cited Socrates, Anaxarchus, and Zeno of Elea as philosophers persecuted unjustly.¹⁸ Likewise, the Middle Platonic Plutarch, very familiar with Stoic ideas,

mito: Religione e narrazione nel mondo antico (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2014), 47; Matteo Monfrinotti, *Creatore e creazione: il pensiero di Clemente Alessandrino* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2014), 197 and 306. Also my "Bardesane e la sua scuola, l'Apologia siriana 'di Melitone' e la *Doctrina Addai*", *Aevum* 83 (2009): 141-168.

14 Merz and Tieleman, "The Letter of Mara Bar Serapion," 107-33.

15 "Comments on the Edition by David Rensberger," 205-231.

16 George van Kooten, "The Last Days of Socrates and Christ," in *Religio-Philosophical Discourses in the Mediterranean World: From Plato, through Jesus, to Late Antiquity*, ed. Anders Klostergaard Petersen, George van Kooten (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 219-243, esp. 219-221; quotation from 219. I would add at least David Rensberger, Teun Tieleman, and Annette Merz.

17 A widespread argument against astrological determinism: Beatrice Motta, *Il Contra Fatum di Gregorio di Nissa nel dibattito tardo-antico sul fatalismo e sul determinismo* (Pisa-Rome: Serra, 2008); my review in *TMR* 09.11.22 (2009):

<https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/tmr/article/view/16912>.

18 *ND* 3.82-83.

cited Pythagoras, Socrates, and Antiphon as philosophical martyrs.¹⁹ Cicero's discourse resembles Mara's argument since it adduces the notion of divine justice against evildoers, be these single persons or whole cities, as in Mara. He probably adduced a typical Stoic argument, since the Academic Cotta, in Cicero's debate, clarifies that the opponents of the Stoics refuted that divine punishment could be manifested in the destruction of an entire city. Now, Mara argues forcefully in his letter precisely that God punished grave crimes by the destruction of a whole city. This point in Mara's letter comes after a sapiential reflection on the vanity of things and possessions in the world (§ 12, 13).

Indeed, in § 12, after the initial questions, "Begin, O wisest among the human race, and tell us, on which possession shall a person rely? Or of what things shall one say that they seem enduring?" a sequence of questions and answers (what I would call a "binomial sequence") begins:

Of great riches? *They can be grabbed away.*
 Of fortified towns? *They can be plundered.*
 Of cities? *They can be laid waste.*
 Of majesty? *It can be brought low.*
 Of magnificence? *It can be thrown down.*
 Of beauty? *It fades.*
 Of laws, then? *They pass away.*
 Or of poverty? *It is despised.*
 Or of children? *They die.*
 Or of friends? *They prove false.*
 Or of honors? *Envy goes before them.*

The second parts of the binomial pairs above, which I marked in italics, delineates a series of disasters, either collective or individual. The same structure, but in the reverse order, can be found in § 13: a binomial sequence, like the above-quoted one, is here not preceded, but followed, by a plain remark. First, we find the binomial sequence:

So, let a man rejoice in his kingdom—*like Darius;*
 or in his good fortune—*like Polycrates;*
 or in his valor—*like Achilles;*
 or in his wife—*like Agamemnon;*
 or in his offspring—*like Priam;*
 or in his craftsmanship—*like Archimedes;*
 or in his wisdom—*like Socrates;*
 or in his learning—*like Pythagoras;*
 or in his brilliance—*like Palamedes.*

19 *Stoic. Rep.* 1051B.

In the second binomial tag, the mythical and historical examples—although not always precise and accurate—also signify a disaster, mostly individual, but also collective: virtually all of the characters mentioned are cited because of their violent death, or the death of their children too, as in the case of Priam. Darius could be interpreted as Darius III, who lost his empire when he was defeated by Alexander the Great, or possibly as Darius I, who wanted to conquer Greece but was defeated by the Athenians. Archimedes, thanks to his ingenious machines, defended Syracuse against the Romans, but was killed when the city was conquered. Palamedes, because of a machination of Odysseus, was stoned to death as a traitor. Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, was deceived by the Persian satrap of Ionia and killed by crucifixion. Achilles was killed by the much less valiant Paris. Agamemnon was killed by his wife Clytaemnestra with her lover Aegisthus after his return from the Trojan victory. Then, Mara remarks by way of conclusion: “People’s lives, my son, vanish from the world; but their praises and virtues endure forever.” Note that Mara does not mention the resurrection of the body, but not even the immortality of the soul, a Platonic tenet later embraced by both Jewish and Christian Platonists, from Philo of Alexandria to Gregory of Nyssa and beyond.²⁰

In § 12 and in § 13, in both binomial sequences, there is an opposition between the first and the second term of the binomial line. First, in the questions and answers in § 12, the answer puts down the expectation implicit in the question: “Of beauty?—It fades. Of children?—They die,” and so on. Then, in § 13, each binomial line shows how the virtue or capacity exalted in the first term has proved dangerous and even fatal for the person who constitutes the relevant example: one should rejoice and boast “in his wife—like Agamemnon,” who was killed by his wife Clytaemnestra; “or in his wisdom—like Socrates,” who was put to death by the Athenians through false testimony, owing to his philosophical wisdom. Other cases are listed as well.

A new binomial series occurs at § 18. After a long initial question, “What else can we say, when the wise suffer violence at the hands of tyrants, their wisdom is taken captive by denunciation, and for all their enlightenment they are dispossessed with no opportunity for defense?” a threefold binomial sequence follows, characterized again by an opposition between the first and the second binomial term:

- What benefit did the Athenians derive from the slaying of Socrates?
 – For they received the *retribution for it in the form of famine and plague.* /
 Or the people of Samos from the burning of Pythagoras?
 – For in one hour *their entire country was covered with sand.* /
 Or the Jews [from the killing] of their wise king?
 – For from that very time *their sovereignty was taken away.*

²⁰ See Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, “Gregory of Nyssa on the Soul (and the Restoration): From Plato to Origen,” in *Exploring Gregory of Nyssa: Historical and Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Neil McLynn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 110-141.

The second line of the three sequences of two lines indicates a divine retribution (which I highlighted in italics) for the injustice mentioned in the first line against a philosopher (whose name I underlined), in the form of a collective disaster. The divine vengeance against the Athenians took the form of a famine and a plague (although here we witness a historical inversion for the sake of the argument).²¹ Retribution against the Samians took the form of a flood and the covering of their whole island in sand, a prophecy found in the *Sibylline Oracles*,²² with the etymological wordplay “Samos will become sand”;²³ and that against the Jews consisted in their being bereft of their kingdom. In this case, the *lex talionis* becomes evident: since “the Jews”—here taken collectively, albeit this is not historically accurate—had their wise *king* killed by the Romans, their whole *kingdom* was taken away from them by the Romans.

In the case of Samos and Pythagoras, instead, the *lex talionis* seems to function *e contrario*: Pythagoras was burnt alive by some Samians, and the island of Samos was flooded. Plutarch, in times close to those of Mara, in *Stoic. Rep.* 1051C attests that Pythagoras died in the fire of his house; in *Deo Socr.* 583A he details that Pythagoras died immediately after the fire.²⁴ However, while all Greco-Roman sources locate Pythagoras’ death in Southern Italy, to which he had migrated from Samos, Mara identifies Samos as the place of Pythagoras’ death, possibly to link his killing to a vengeance that he knew from the *Sibylline Oracles*: the aforementioned covering of all Samos with sand.

Here, again, the crime of some inhabitants is vindicated through the punishment of the whole island. The same disproportion is evident in the case of Jesus and the punishment of the whole Jewish kingdom. However, Mara insists on the divinity’s justice in its vengeance: “[f]or God rightly exacted retribution on behalf of the wisdom of these three.” Then, a second double sequence follows, with three and three *cola*, six in all; both groups of three are ordered in an ascending *climax*:

- I. For the Athenians *starved to death*,
and the people of Samos were *covered by the sea* without remedy,
and the Jews, *massacred and chased from their kingdom*, are *scattered through every land*.
- II. Socrates did not die, because of *Plato*;
nor did Pythagoras, because of the *statue of Hera*;
nor did the wise king, because of *the new laws that he gave*.

21 In Athens, the plague began in the summer of 430 BCE, thirty-one years *before* Socrates’ death; both the famine, λιμός, and the plague, λοιμός, are mentioned, apparently as alternatives, by Thucydides, 2.54.

22 3.363, 4.91, 8.166.

23 Σάμος - ἄμμος.

24 See also Porphyry, *Vit. Pyth.* 56-57.

Section I details the disasters mentioned in the previous paragraph: (1) the Athenians were “starved to death” during the previously mentioned famine, in spite of the chronological inversion of which Mara seems to have been unaware; (2) the island of Samos was “covered by the sea,” which parallels the idea of its being “covered by sand” in the previous paragraph; (3) the fate of the Jews is described in much more detail: they were slaughtered, driven away from their own kingdom, and scattered everywhere. Section II describes the compensation that God bestowed on the philosophers killed unjustly: they did not die. This was not because Mara theorized any kind of immortality—being neither a Platonist nor a Christian. In fact, he does not even conceive of an “astral” immortality which the Stoics used to reserve for heroes, as is clear in the Stoicizing tragedy *Hercules Oetaeus*, preserved in the corpus of Seneca’s tragedies, which was written near the time of the setting of Mara’s letter.²⁵ Rather, the wise people killed did not die because Socrates’ ideas were recorded in Plato’s dialogues. Pythagoras produced a statue of Hera—again a historical inaccuracy on the part of Mara: a confusion between the philosopher and the sculptor—and Jesus promulgated “new laws,” followed by his movement.

Historically, the considerations on the king of the Jews and the divine punishment of his killers,²⁶ unlike those on the much earlier cases of Socrates and Pythagoras, were probably dictated by the chronological closeness of this historical example to Mara’s own time. The connection that Mara draws between Jesus’ death and the fall of Jerusalem may have been chosen as an example because of the chronological closeness of such events to Mara’s own time.

Mara probably received the link between Jesus’ sentencing to death and the destruction of Jerusalem from a Christian source, even belonging to the early Jesus movement; Hegesippus (mid-second century, based on first-century sources) and Origen already show such a nexus²⁷ (which does not necessarily imply that Mara was a Christian

25 See Ilaria Ramelli, “La Chiesa di Roma e la cultura pagana,” *RSCI* 52 (1998): 11-31; “Seneca the Younger (Lucius Annaeus Seneca),” in *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. Roger Bagnall et. al. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013) 11:6145-6148; “Paul’s Problematic Relation to Judaism in the Seneca-Paul Original Correspondence,” in *The Early Reception of Paul the Jew, Proceedings of the 7th Enoch Seminar Nangeroni Meeting, Rome, June 26-30, 2016*, ed. Gabriele Boccaccini and Isaac Oliver, with Joshua Scott (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, The Library of Second Temple Studies, 2018), 220-235. “Seneca the Younger,” in *Encyclopaedia of Second Temple Judaism*, 2, eds. Loren T. Stuckenbruck – Daniel M. Gurtner (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 723.

26 On the facts of 70 CE see now Martin Goodman, *A History of Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2018), section 2.

27 Hegesippus links the death of James the Just, Jesus’ “brother,” to the destruction of Jerusalem (*ap.* Eusebius *HE* 2,23,18; 3,11), like the mss. of Josephus known to Origen, while Origen corrected this view stating that Jerusalem was destroyed because of the execution of Jesus. See my “Jesus, James the Just, a Gate, and an Epigraph”, in *Das*

himself, or his letter was a Christian forgery or exercise). Christians from the very beginning onwards were the first and main agents of the circulation of Jesus' story. However, judging from what appears in the letter, Mara reflected on this historical case as a Stoic, and even seems to have applied a Stoicizing theory of disasters to this case as to the others he cites. Mara does not speak of Jesus' resurrection, as the *Testimonium Flavianum*, approximately of the same age, does—at least reporting the disciples' perspective—²⁸ but points to Jesus' "new law," with respect to the Mosaic Law, as a proof of his "earthly" immortality. These "new laws" given by Jesus Christ are the same that are mentioned—though not as a proof of his earthly immortality but as an argument against determinism—in the *Liber legum regionum* or *Book of the Laws of Countries* from the school of Bardaisan, which reflects Bardaisan's ideas in his dialogue *Against Fate*.²⁹ Bardaisan speaks of the "laws of Christ" followed by the Christians always and in every region:

What should we say, then, concerning the new race of us, the Christians,³⁰ whom Christ established in every land and in all regions at his coming? For, lo and behold, in whatever land we are, we are all called "Christians," from the one name of Christ. And in the same day, the first of the week [Sunday], we come together, and on the prescribed days we fast. And neither do our brothers who are in Gaul marry men, nor do those who are in Parthia take two wives, nor are those who live in Judea circumcised, nor do our sisters who are among the Gelians or the Kushan have intercourse with strangers, nor do those who are in Persia marry their own daughters, nor do those who are in Media flee from their dead, or bury them while they are still alive, or give them as food to dogs, nor do those who live in Edessa kill their wives who commit fornication, or their sisters, but they separate themselves from them and hand them to God's judgment. Nor do those who live in Hatra stone thieves, but in whatever land they are, and in

Gesetzesverständnis der Logienquelle auf dem Hintergrund frühjüdischer Theologie, ed. Markus Tiwald (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2013), 203-229.

²⁸ Ilaria Ramelli, "Alcune Osservazioni circa il *Testimonium Flavianum*", *Sileno* 24 (1998): 219–235; eadem, "Gesù e il Tempio", *Maia* 63 (2011): 1–38; "Jesus, James the Just," 203-229. On the *Testimonium*'s total authenticity, including the statement, "this was the Christ/Messiah", see Carsten Thiede, *Jesus. Der Glaube, die Fakten* (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich, 2003), 34–35; idem, *Jesus und Tiberius* (München: Luchterhand, 2004), 303–337, and, with interesting arguments taken from the history of religions, Ulrich Victor, "Das *Testimonium Flavianum*", *NovT* 52 (2010): 72–82. Also the commentary by Étienne Nodet, *Antiquités Juives de Flavius Josèphe*, 5 vols (Paris: Cerf, 1990–2010).

²⁹ See above, n. 1.

³⁰ Bardaisan has spoken so far of all other peoples, including the Jews, in the third person, but he speaks of the Christians in the first person plural, and also uses the appellatives "brothers" and "sisters" for the Christians as his fellow-believers.

whatever place, local laws cannot separate them from the law of their Christ: the principalities' power does not force them to do or use things that are impure for them, but illness and good health, richness and poverty, all that does not depend on their freewill happens to them wherever they are.³¹

Stoic Theories of Disasters, Mara's Letter, and Their Application to Jesus and the Jewish Kingdom

Now, the information that Mara learned about Jesus, as well as his other examples of older philosophers, fit the argument of collective deaths as divine punishments and his scheme of the wise man unjustly persecuted by a whole people but avenged by the divinity through the punishment of those people. Although this may appear disproportionate, it is consistent with Stoicizing theories of disasters. The philosopher unjustly persecuted, in Mara's exemplification, is even compensated by an eternal reward (Mara envisages an earthly perennial memory, rather than a transcendent eternity).

This argument related to theories of disasters, individual or collective, is attested in Stoicism from Chrysippus to Dio Chrysostom and beyond. The sequence of examples is also the same, with the exception that Mara adds Jesus and applies the same theory to his case, and assimilates him to earlier Greek philosophers unjustly put to death. Plutarch quotes the exempla adduced by Chrysippus of unjustly persecuted sages: Socrates and Pythagoras.³² Dio of Prusa, a Stoicizing contemporary of Mara, and a disciple of the Stoic Musonius Rufus,³³ writing shortly after Mara's letter at the very beginning of the second century, returns to the theme of the wise who have been unjustly persecuted. Like Mara he also adds the detail of the subsequent punishment of the persecutors. The examples are the same as those adduced by Mara, apart from Jesus: Socrates and Pythagoras.³⁴ Dio notes that Socrates was killed by his fellow-citizens, who were punished with many misfortunes that happened to them afterwards and with blame still at the time of Dio³⁵—which was probably also the time of Mara Bar Serapion.

³¹ *The Book of the Laws of Countries* 15 Ramelli (= ms. fols. 139v-140r).

³² *Stoic. Rep.* 1051BD.

³³ See my "Philosophen und Prediger: Dion und Paulus - pagane und christliche weise Männer," in Heinz-Günther Nesselrath, Sotera Fornaro, Eugenio Amato, Barbara Borg, Ilaria Ramelli, Jacques Schamp, Renate Burri, *Dion von Prusa. Der Philosoph und sein Bild* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009, SAPERE 13), 183-210.

³⁴ *Or.* 47.2-7; cfr. 43.8-9; 51. 7-8.

³⁵ *Or.* 47.7.

Socrates' unjust condemnation to death was in the focus of a whole diatribe (*Dissertation* 3) by Maximus of Tyre, who was influenced both by Stoicism and by Middle Platonism.³⁶ At the end of this diatribe, at section 8, he observes, like Mara, that the Athenians were punished with the plague, their defeat in the Peloponnesian war and the loss of their power: "Socrates died, but the Athenians were condemned, and their judge was God and the Truth ... This is how God judges, this is how God condemns." The very attribution of the punishment of the Athenians to God's justice and the truth is parallel to that of Mara to God and justice. Even the chronological inversion between the cause and the effect is the same as I have pointed out in Mara's letter: the Peloponnesian war and the plague of Athens were in fact anterior to the condemnation of Socrates; they did not follow it. The notion is the same, even in this historical mistake, clearly overlooked for the sake of the argument.

The novelty is, again, that Mara adds to the philosophers the figure of "the wise king of the Jews": this was indeed an attempt to represent Jesus as a philosopher,³⁷ precisely a philosopher-king. This figure had in Solomon a prominent antecedent, the wise king of the Jews celebrated in 1 Kings and 1-2 Chronicles, and certainly known to Mara. Even the Christian claim that Jesus was still alive (also reported in the *Testimonium Flavianum*), if Mara ever heard it, was interpreted by him in line with the Stoic doctrine that denied the immortality of the soul and even more resurrection, except at the general *παλιγγενεσία* at the end of each aeon, which should be understood against the backdrop of an infinite cyclical theory of time.³⁸ The "wise king" survives simply in the new laws he gave.

It must be remarked that Mara's designation of Jesus as "king of the Jews" exactly corresponds to what was inscribed on the *titulus crucis* placed by the Romans on Jesus's cross, in order to indicate the reason for his condemnation to death.³⁹ The Gospels highlight Jesus' prophecy on the destruction of the Temple.⁴⁰ This was one of the charges against Jesus in his trial before the Sanhedrin.⁴¹ John is the Gospel which most of all emphasizes the Temple and Jesus's royalty and glory, to the point of presenting his

36 See Michael Trapp, *Maximus of Tyre: The Philosophical Orations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 24-25.

37 For its importance in the first moves toward the representation of Christianity as a philosophy, see my "Ethos and Logos."

38 Discussed in *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), Ch. 1; further in *Tempo ed eternità in età antica e patristica: filosofia greca, ebraismo e cristianesimo* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2015).

39 Mark 15:26; Matth 27:37; Luke 23:38; John 19:19-21. See my "Gesù e il Tempio" and Maria-Luisa Rigato, *I. N. R. I. Il titolo della Croce* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2010), with my review in *Aevum* 85 (2011): 250-252; "Jesus of Nazareth," in *The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

40 Mark 13:2; John 2:19.

41 According to Matt 26:61 (cf. 27:40.51) and Mark 14:58 and 15:29 (cf. 15:38). See also Ramelli, "Prophecy in Origen: Between Scripture and Philosophy," *Journal of Early Christian History* 7.2 (2017): 17-39.

crucifixion as an exaltation in which he dragged all to himself,⁴² but insists that Jesus's kingdom is not of this world. The Evangelist knew that Jesus was accused and condemned because of his alleged aspiration to be the king of the Jews; this is why he makes it clear that Jesus' kingdom "is not of this world" (18:36). This is a polemic against Pilate's *titulus*, the formal condemnation of Jesus; the fourth Gospel, indeed, most insists on the *titulus*.⁴³ Philip Esler suggests that the Temple authorities had the text of *Psalms of Solomon* 17 and saw enough correspondences in Jesus' preaching as to want him killed.⁴⁴ Revelation, in continuity with the Johannine Gospel, pays special attention to the Temple and its liturgy.⁴⁵

Now, Mara may not have known John, let alone Revelation, but more likely he had at his disposal the mention of the *titulus crucis* in Matt 27:37 or its tradition: "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."⁴⁶ This exactly corresponds to Mara's description of Jesus, to which he attached the designation of "wise" in order to assimilate him to the Greek philosophers and to absorb his example into his Stoicizing theory of disasters.

The Problem of Sources and the Relation between Providence and Unjust Executions in Stoicism

Mara's operation of Stoic interpretation of narratives that could have come to him from Christian sources seems close to the variety of Stoic themes in the Gospel of Matthew,⁴⁷ which is chronologically close to Mara. He received the story of Jesus and attributed his own Stoicizing doctrines to Jesus the Judean sage. The Stoicizing Mara described him as "the *wise* king of the *Jews*"—the Jewish sage or philosopher. I suspect that Mara may even have known something of the tradition of Matthew.

42 John 12:32. Ramelli, *Apokatastasis*, Ch. 1; the volume of *Novum Testamentum Patristicum* on John 13-17, in preparation, will deal with this point.

43 John 19:19-22.

44 Philip Esler, "Beware the Messiah! Psalms of Solomon 17 and the Death of Jesus" in *To Set at Liberty*, ed. Stephen Black (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2014), Ch. 9.

45 Ramelli, "Gesù e il Tempio," *Maia* 63 (2011): 107-144; "Jesus, James the Just," 203-229.

46 See my "Jesus of Nazareth."

47 Pointed out by Stanley Stowers, "Jesus as Teacher of Stoic Ethics in Matthew," in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus, Ismo Dunderberg, and Troels Engberg-Pedersen (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010). I am very grateful to Stan Stowers for letting me read his essay prior to publication. On Stoicism in the NT, literature is growing; see, among the most recent cases, my "Gal 3:28 and Aristotelian (and Jewish) Categories of Inferiority," *Eirene* 55 (2019): 1-29, with further literature on other case studies.

4 Maccabees is another Jewish Hellenistic writing of the first century CE in which Stoic themes are prominent, indeed more than in Matthew. This book focuses on the theme of the sovereignty of λογισμός over πάθη.⁴⁸ Philo's reception of Stoicism is not too inferior to that of Platonism, although mostly it was limited to ethics, not to metaphysics, given that Philo was more Platonizing.⁴⁹ These texts, in any case, show how deeply Stoicism had entered Jewish Hellenism. But only Matthew, the "Stoicizing" Gospel, and the other earliest Christian narratives included a story on Jesus. Mara probably received such a story from Christian circles or sources, perhaps from the Matthaean tradition, but elaborated it in a Stoicizing way, as I have suggested—including the theory of disasters on which we are focusing in this essay.

In connection with this motif, Stoicism faced the following problem: how can divine providence be reconciled with the violent deaths of excellent men and especially philosophers, such as Socrates and Pythagoras? The third Stoic scholarch, Chrysippus, argued that the influence of evil demons played a part in this course of events.⁵⁰ Mara insists that the cases of Socrates, Pythagoras and Jesus indicate that God punished the evildoers later on, and that these wise men were then recompensed by perennial renown (not by eternal life or bliss). He was adopting the Stoic argument that wicked people are punished at some point, a Stoic tenet that is reported by the Neo-Academic Cicero,⁵¹ and also by the Stoic Seneca.⁵² A loose contemporary of Mara, the Middle Platonic Plutarch, who often shows awareness of Stoic ideas, composed *De sera numinum vindicta*, which agrees with Mara's argument. According to the Stoics (just as according to Platonists such as Philo and Origen when they interpreted Scripture), the divinities do punish, but not out of anger at human injustice, since divinities are free of bad emotions,⁵³ just as they are untouched by unwise prayers. This is clear in the Roman Stoic Persius' criticism of fool

48 So much so that Gregory Nazianzen in *Or.* 15.2 refers to 4 Maccabees as Περί τοῦ ἀποκρατοῦ εἶναι τῶν παθῶν τὸν λογισμὸν, *The Rational Faculty Dominates Passions*. I limit myself to referring to Robert Renehan, "The Greek Philosophical Background of Fourth Maccabees," *Rheinisches Museum* 115 (1972): 223-238, Reinhard Weber, "Eusebeia und Logismos. Zum philosophischen Hintergrund von 4. Makkabäer," *JSJ* 22 (1991): 212-34, and Jan Willem van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People. A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Herwig Görgemanns, "Philosophie, Gesetz und Vorbild. Zu einigen Abschnitten des 4. Makkabäerbuches," in *Quaerite faciem eius semper*, Festschrift Albrecht Dihle, ed. Andrea Jördens et al. (Hamburg: Kovac, 2008), 78-90.

49 See Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "Philo as One of the Main Inspirers of Early Christian Hermeneutics and Apophatic Theology," *Adamantius* 24 (2018): 276-292.

50 *Ap.* Plut. *Stoic. Rep.* 1051B-D (*SVF* 2.1178), Cic. *ND* 3.79-93, Sen. *Prov.* 5.6.

51 *ND* 3.79-93, partially collected in *SVF* 2.1179, 1180, 1107, 1197.

52 *Ep.* 110.2, 95.50.

53 "Passions" or πάθη, e.g., Cic. *ND* 3.91.

prayers, based not on *logos* (the essence of the divinity) but on irrationality.⁵⁴ He too was almost a contemporary of Mara.

Another loose contemporary, the Stoic Hierocles, from the end of the first and the beginning of the second century CE, claimed that the gods are not responsible for evil, as Plato had done in the Myth of Er in his *Republic*, a passage that became the basis for subsequent theodicy ('pagan' and Christian alike).⁵⁵ Divine punishments are rather beneficial: they attack the bodily, external conditions of the evildoers, with the aim of improving their spiritual, moral level:⁵⁶ Origen of Alexandria, a Christian Platonist who absorbed many Stoic ethical themes, will emphasize this point.⁵⁷ Thus, divine punishment is in fact an act of providential care. Hierocles believes that entire nations may be punished in the same way and for the same purpose. Disasters such as earthquakes, famine and pestilence occur mostly through natural causes, but the gods may also use them sometimes to punish the sins of many people, collectively,⁵⁸ as in Mara's letter.

Indeed, this is what Hierocles the Stoic, in the time of Mara, observes in his passage excerpted by Stobaeus:

Of Hierocles, from the treatise "How Should One Behave toward the Gods?"

I believe that it contributes much to behaving well toward the gods also to consider that a god is never the cause of any evil but that evils befall us as a result of vice alone, whereas the gods, in themselves, are responsible for good and useful things: but we do not welcome their benefactions but rather wrap ourselves in evils freely chosen. I think that a well-known poetic passage is opportune here, in connection with this topic: "mortals blame the gods" as though evils were sent by them, whereas they themselves, by their own faults, have sufferings beyond what is fated. For that a god, in fact, is never in any way responsible for evils one may realize on the basis of many things, but for the present, perhaps, that famous argument of Plato may suffice. For he says that cooling is not a property of heat but rather of the opposite, and warming is not a property of cold but rather of the opposite; so too, then, doing evil is not a property of a benefactor but rather of the opposite. Now, a god is good, filled right from the beginning with all the virtues; thus, a god cannot be a doer of evil nor a cause of evils for anyone: on the contrary, he furnishes good things to all who are willing to receive them, delighting in good things and, among those that are indifferent, in all those that are in accord with nature in regard to

54 See my *Stoici Romani Minori* (Milan: Bompiani, 2008), 1361-1515.

55 See my *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (Oxford: OUP, 2017). On Hierocles, see my *Hierocles the Stoic* (Leiden: Brill – Atlanta: SBL, 2009).

56 Sen. *Prov.* 5.6.

57 See my *Apokatastasis*, section on Origen; *Origen*, ch. 4.

58 Hierocles *ap.* Stob. *Ecl.* I.3.54, p. 64.1-14 Wachsmuth; cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 95.50; *Ben.* 7.7.3-4.

us and productive of things in accord with nature. But vice [κακία] is the one and only thing that is responsible for evils [κακά] ...

It is necessary to consider the following, given that *gods are the cause of good things but never of vice or evils*: What, then, is the reason for our faring badly? Since, of indifferent things, some are contrary to nature and adverse or, by Zeus, productive of such things, it is worth making a distinction here among these too: I mean, for example, illness, disability, death, poverty, reputation, and similar things. Now vice, too, is naturally so constituted as to bring about many of these things. Many illnesses and many disabilities arise as a result both of lack of self-control and libertinism. And because of injustice many have had a hand cut off or endured other such mutilations, and many have died outright. Even medicine, kindly to men, is often impeded in its application by vice: for the benefits of the art are rendered useless by the disobedience, lack of self-control, and avoidance of effort on the part of those who are sick. Indeed, profligacy and prodigality have made many men beggars and destitute, while a shameful avarice and niggardliness have made many infamous. After vice, however, the second cause of such things is matter...⁵⁹

Some time may elapse between the evildoers' actions and their punishment, as Plutarch and Mara taught. Cicero reports that the Stoics deemed the destruction of entire cities as the dispensation of divine justice and thereby a sign of divine providence.⁶⁰

Mara's letter contains reflections that concur with this theory. As reported in the Gospels, Jesus sometimes criticized the conception of divine retribution, for example in individual cases of illness,⁶¹ like the man born blind, concerning whom Jesus, overturning a widespread conviction, declares that "Neither this man nor his parents sinned".⁶² Jesus claimed that his disability was not a punishment of any sin but rather aimed at the manifestation of God's glory. Concerning the idea of disasters as collective punishments, Jesus makes it clear that those who are victims of these disasters are not more culpable than those who are spared: "At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. He asked them, 'Do

⁵⁹ Ramelli, *Hierocles the Stoic*, 67-69. See also the relevant commentary.

⁶⁰ ND 3.91.

⁶¹ See argument in my "Disability in Bardaisan and Origen. Between the Stoic Adiaphora and the Lord's Grace," in *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese*, ed. Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Markus Schiefer Ferrari (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012), 141-159, received by Heidi Marx-Wolf and Kristi Upson-Saia, "The State of the Question: Religion, Medicine, Disability, and Health in Late Antiquity," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8.2 (2015): 257-272: 271; H.J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, introduction by Jan Willem Drijvers (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2014), xv; Chris L. De Wet, *The Unbound God: Slavery and the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (Oxford: Routledge, 2017), 72, 171.

⁶² John 9:3; Rush Otey, "Between Text and Sermon: John 9:1-7," *Interpretation* 73 (2019): 392-394.

you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did”.⁶³

However, Jesus also predicted the destruction of Jerusalem as a punishment for its sins, in particular that of killing its prophets—clearly including Jesus himself! “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! See! *Your house is left to you desolate*; and assuredly, I say to you, you shall not see me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’”.⁶⁴ A very close version is preserved in Matthew, which directly or indirectly, and maybe in its original Hebrew or Aramaic form,⁶⁵ might have been known to Mara and have supported his notion of the destruction of Jerusalem as a divine punishment for Jesus’ unjust execution:

And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. Truly I tell you, all this will come on this generation. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, *your house is left to you desolate*. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’⁶⁶

The Stoic concept of the divine origin of some disasters as the vengeance for crimes, indicated in Mara’s letter, corresponds to his Stoicizing frame of mind, which is evident all over the document. For instance, Mara exhorts his son to “obey in virtue rather than obeying in rage/anger,” that is, “obey with virtue rather than obeying with anger.”⁶⁷ This very likely means: “instead of obeying angrily, obey as a virtuous person.” This represents an important Stoic ethical principle concerning the behavior of the wise with regard to fate. The Stoic sage, who is the virtuous par excellence, must follow fate voluntarily in

63 Luke 13:1-5, NRSV.

64 Luke 13:34-35, KJV.

65 Ilaria Ramelli, “Making the Bible World Literature,” in *Wiley-Blackwell Companion to World Literature*, 1, ed. Wiebke Denecke and Ilaria Ramelli (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2020).

66 Matt 23:35-39.

67 End of § 28.

virtue, and not against his will and angrily. In a passage translated by Seneca,⁶⁸ Cleanthes puts it this way: a person who obeys voluntarily is virtuous, *bonus*; one who obeys against his will, with anger and sadness, *gemens*, is in vice (*malus*). This is precisely the Stoic idea that underlies Mara's sentence.

Other Stoic Features in Mara's Letter: Embedding a Stoicizing Theory of Disasters?

In the sentence "those who conduct themselves outside the law," who are the fool (φᾶῶλοι) as opposed to the wise (σοφοί),⁶⁹ "law" is to be understood as the Stoic νόμος, the moral law, the law of Zeus.⁷⁰ This notion was put into verses already by the Old Stoic Cleanthes, who describes Zeus as "first cause and ruler of nature, governing everything with your law." This also was allegorized until at least Cornutus⁷¹ and emphasized by Musonius Rufus who insisted on the "law of Zeus," which a person ought to obey not forcedly or passively, but willingly, so as to be σύμψηφος with the supreme god.⁷² More Stoic hints in Mara's Letter confirm the possibility of a Stoic reading of its theory of disasters; I shall offer just some examples.

68 *Ap. Seneca Ep.* 107.10: "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."

69 § 14.

70 Studied in my "La "Città di Zeus" di Musonio Rufo nelle sue ascendenze vetero-stoiche e nell'eredità neostoica e cristiana," *Stylos* 11 (2002): 151-158. The presence of the Stoic concept of "law" in Paul, particularly in 1 Corinthians 7 and Romans, has been argued for by Niko Huttunen, "Stoic Law in Paul?" in *Stoicism in Early Christianity*, ed. Tuomas Rasimus, Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Ismo Dunderberg (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2010), 39-58.

On the allegorization of law in Old Stoicism and Cornutus see my *Allegoria: L'età classica* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2004), 88-90; 108-111; 293-302. On Cornutus eadem, *Anneo Cornuto, Compendio di teologia greca* (Milan: Bompiani, 2003), on which are also expressly based (see *Vorwort*, vii) the introduction, translation, and notes of the volume *Cornutus: Die Griechischen Götter. Ein Überblick über Namen, Bilder und Deutungen*, ed. Heinz-Günther Nesselrath in collaboration with Fabio Berdozzo, with essays by George Boy-Stones, Hans-Josef Klauck, Ilaria Ramelli and Alexei Zadorojnyi (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); George Boys-Stones, *L. Annaeus Cornutus: Greek Theology, Fragments, and Testimonia* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 712018); Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, "Annaeus Cornutus and the Stoic Allegorical Tradition: Meaning, Sources, and Impact," *AITLA. Regards sur la culture hellénistique* 8.2 (2018).

72 See my "Dio come padre nello Stoicismo Romano al tempo della predicazione cristiana e nell'Epistola Anne," in *Scripta Antiqua in honorem A. Montenegro Duque et J.M^a. Blázquez Martínez*, ed. S. Crespo Ortiz de Zárate - A. Alonso Ávila (Valladolid: Publicaciones de la Universidad de Valladolid, 2002), 343-51; eadem, "L'interpretazione allegorica filosofica di Zeus come Padre nello Stoicismo," in *Visiones mítico-religiosas del padre en la antigüedad clásica*, ed. Marcos Ruiz Sánchez (Monografías y Estudios de Antigüedad Griega y Romana 12; Madrid: Signifer, 2004), 155-80; eadem, *Stoici Romani*, 689-943.

Another important Stoic notion that appears in Mara's letter is that of Fate: "[a]ll these things that appear to you in the world as they seem to be are to pass away in a little while like a dream [or, as I have proposed as a possible alternative interpretation: "All these things that appear to you in the world, how are they not to pass away in a little while like a dream?"]. For they are simply the ups and downs of fate."⁷³ Rensberger, by rendering "fate," rightly detaches himself from Cureton's translation ("times") and Schulthess's version ("Zeiten"), just as I did myself in my translation: "gli alti e i bassi dei destini." The Syriac word, literally meaning "times," is a plural. I maintained the plural because I understand it to refer to individual fates or destinies, each one for a single person, and moreover each one with varieties in itself ("ups and downs"): hence the plural. At any rate, the concept of Fate, the Stoic Εἴμαρμένη, was a well established notion between the end of the second and the early third century CE, as is proved by Bardaisan's aforementioned work *Against Fate*.⁷⁴ In this text, against the Chaldaean notion of Fate he employed arguments used by the Academic Carneades against the Stoic Εἴμαρμένη. Bardaisan even added an argument of his own against the determinism of climatic/geographical zones, which was later taken up by several Christian authors,⁷⁵ as well as another argument taken from the diffusion of the Christians in all geographic zones and climates. Bardaisan attests that many people around Osrhoene, a region that was very close to Mara's Commagene, followed fatalistic determinism. Stoicism is attested in the Syriac world at the time of Mara also by other sources: in the late Sixties of the first century, very shortly before the setting of Mara's letter, the preaching of the Stoic Musonius was attended by a Syriac king.⁷⁶

At the beginning of § 11, Rensberger translates: "[w]hat then can we say of the delusion that makes its home in the world and leads it along with heavy labor, so that as it quakes like a reed in the wind, we also vacillate with it." One might interpret as follows:

⁷³ At the end of § 6.

⁷⁴ Κατὰ Εἴμαρμένης in the title transmitted by Theodoret; Περὶ Εἴμαρμένης in Eusebius. On this work and its relation to the *Liber Legum Regionum* see Han J.W. Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1966), Ilaria Ramelli, "Linee generali per una presentazione e per un commento del *Liber legum regionum*, con traduzione italiana del testo siriano e dei frammenti greci," *Rendiconti dell'Istituto Lombardo, Accademia di Scienze e Lettere* 133 (1999): 311–55; eadem, "Bardesane e la sua scuola tra la cultura occidentale e quella orientale: il lessico della libertà nel *Liber legum regionum* (testo siriano e versione greca)," in *Pensiero e istituzioni del mondo classico nelle culture del Vicino Oriente*, ed. Rosa Bianca Finazzi and Alfredo Valvo (Alessandria: Dell'Orso, 2001), 237–55; eadem, *Bardesane Kata Heimarmenēs* (Bologna: ESD, 2009); eadem, "Bardesane e la sua scuola, l'Apologia siriana 'di Melitone' e la *Doctrina Addai*," *Aevum* 83 (2009): 141–68; on the arguments and their philosophical settings esp. my "Bardaisan of Edessa, Origen, and Imperial Philosophy," *Aram* 30.1–2 (2018): 337–353. Full commentary in *Bardaisan on Human Nature*.

⁷⁵ As I argue in *Bardaisan of Edessa*.

⁷⁶ Argument in my "Stoicismo e Cristianesimo in area siriana nella seconda metà del I secolo d.C.," *Sileno* 25 (1999): 197–212.

“[w]hat then can we say of the delusion that makes its home in the world, and progress⁷⁷ in it is with heavy labor,” etc. This interpretation points to the crucial Stoic notion of progress, present already in Ancient Stoicism, but valued more highly in Roman Stoicism. Diogenes Laertius attests that the Stoics “believe that there is nothing between virtue and vice, whereas the Peripatetics say that between virtue and vice there is moral progress [προκοπή]. For the Stoics say that a piece of wood must be either straight or crooked, and so too a person must be either just or unjust, and not more just or more unjust; and similarly for the other virtues.”⁷⁸ When Diogenes states that for the orthodox Stoics there is nothing intermediate between virtue and vice, he means that there is nothing that is partly virtue and partly vice, as one might understand to be the case with moral progress. The Stoics paid special attention to the notion of moral progress, although those who made the most of the notion of moral progress were the “Middle-” and Roman Stoics,⁷⁹ whereas the Old Stoics, in contrast to the Peripatetics, according to Diogenes Laertius,⁸⁰ did not admit of it; this seems to be the prevailing view among scholars.⁸¹ However, SVF 1.234 suggests that for Zeno there exists moral progress: “Note also what Zeno’s view was like; he believed that each person can be aware of his own progress on the basis of his dreams, if he sees that he takes pleasure in nothing shameful and that he does not approve or do anything terrible or strange, but rather, as in the clear depths of a calm sea, without waves, the imaginative and the emotive parts of his soul shine forth, bathed in reason [λόγος].”

Zeno regarded moral progress as a movement toward the predominance of the rational faculty in a person’s life, actions, and choices. This tension seems to reappear also in later authors, such as Musonius.⁸² The apparent contradiction between the sources, in particular this fragment of Zeno and the aforementioned passage of Diogenes Laertius, may be partially explained, I suspect, if we take into consideration Chrysippus’ fragments concerning προκοπή. First of all, he considers nature to manifest a continual progress,

77 The Syriac idea is that of progress; see Payne Smith, *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary*, s.v., 299.

78 Diog. Laërt. *Vit. phil.* 7.127 = SVF 3.536:143.

79 On the importance of moral progress in Middle and Neo-Stoicism, see Geert Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue: The Stoic Doctrine of Moral Progress and Its Reception in (Middle-)Platonism* (Leuven: Leuven University, 2005), 33–144.

80 In the above-mentioned *Vit. phil.* 7.127 = SVF 3.536:143.

81 See Roskam, *On the Path to Virtue*, 15–33; Otto Luschnat, “Das Problem des ethischen Fortschritts in der alten Stoa,” *Philologus* 102 (1958): 178–214.

82 See my “Ierocle Neostoico in Stobaeo: Ικαθήγοντα e l’evoluzione dell’etica stoica,” in *Deciding Culture: Stobaeus’ Collection of Excerpts of Ancient Greek Authors*, ed. Gretchen Reydam-Schils (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 537–575.

understood as a strengthening and perfecting of the *logos*.⁸³ The source, Cicero,⁸⁴ is reliable and the verb *progredi* clearly denotes progress. A similar notion seems to be expressed in SVF 3.219:52, deriving from another reliable source, Seneca's *Ep.* 49: *dociles natura nos edidit et rationem dedit imperfectam, sed quae perfici posset*. Here, too, progress is seen as the natural perfecting of the *logos*. Another fragment confirms that this natural progress of reason was regarded as related to progress in virtue: “the Stoics maintained that since the beginning, by nature, there exists the noteworthy progress [*προκοπήν*] toward the virtues, which the Peripatetics, too, called ‘natural virtue.’”⁸⁵ This fragment was ascribed by von Arnim to Chrysippus, but – as it often happens – the source, Simplicius in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categoriae*, speaks of “the Stoics” in general.

The last three fragments point to the natural perfecting of the *logos* and, with this, a natural progress toward virtue. This kind of progress, linked to the development of the *logos*, seems to be referred to in the aforementioned fragment of Zeno.⁸⁶ Natural progress is important, but perfection in virtue depends for the Stoics, not only on nature, but also on *paideia*. For, “even those who have a poor natural disposition to virtue, if they receive an adequate education, reach moral perfection, and, on the contrary, those who have an excellent natural disposition become evil [*κακοί*] on account of carelessness.”⁸⁷ This is consistent with Stoic ethical intellectualism, on the basis of which virtue depends on knowledge: hence the importance of education. Training and *paideia* are thus linked to moral progress. This is confirmed, to my mind, by a letter of Zeno quoted by Diogenes Laertius⁸⁸ on the basis of a reliable Stoic source, Apollonius of Tyre. Zeno is replying to Antigonus, who asked him to come to Macedonia to give him a *paideia* in virtue and thus enable him to achieve perfect happiness. Zeno praises the true *paideia*, which is for him philosophical education, and leads to happiness, evidently through moral progress. This progress is achieved by means of adequate exercise (*ἄσκησις*) and an energetic teacher.⁸⁹ The goal of moral progress will be “the complete/perfect acquisition of virtue” and thus the attainment of perfect happiness. In several fragments ascribed to Chrysippus in SVF, it is stated that moral progress toward virtue does exist, and virtues themselves are susceptible of increment,⁹⁰ but at the same time it is asserted that those who are still prey to passions and are approaching virtue are as miserable as those who have made no

83 *Ipsam per se naturam longius progredi, quae etiam nullo docente ... confirmat ipsa per se rationem et perficit* (SVF 3.220:52)

84 *Leg.* 1.9.27.

85 SVF 3.217:51.

86 SVF 1.234.

87 SVF 3.225:52, from Clement of Alexandria.

88 *Vit. phil.* 7.8.

89 On *askesis* in Stoicism, Platonism, and Christianity and its continuity, see Ramelli, *Social Justice*.

90 SVF 3.226:52, from Chrysippus' *On Zeus*.

progress at all. Misery will indeed disappear only once the subject has taken hold of virtue. This, however, does not mean that moral progress does not exist for the Stoics.

A confirmation comes from SVF 3.535:143. It stems from a hostile source, Plutarch, who moreover speaks not of Chrysippus but of “the Stoics” in general and thus must be evaluated with prudence. However, its sense is clear: the Stoics do admit of progress (προκοπή), although Plutarch remarks that this concept of theirs remains an enigma to him, “but those who have not yet liberated themselves from absolutely all passions and illnesses are as miserable (κακοδαίμονοῦντας) as those who have not yet got rid of the worst of them.” The very same idea is expressed in SVF 3.530:142, which comes from a trustworthy source, Cicero, who records the similes the Stoics employed to illustrate this idea.⁹¹ Plutarch reports the very same examples of persons immersed in water and of blind newborn puppies,⁹² and exactly the same idea is repeated in another fragment.⁹³ The sense is the same: those who are approaching virtue but have not yet reached it are as *miseri* as those who are very far from it. But, again, this does not erase the idea of moral progress.

The Old Stoics seem therefore to have admitted of progress toward virtue, but maintained that happiness is not achieved until one has reached complete virtue.⁹⁴ That the Old Stoics spoke of persons who are morally progressing (προκόπτοντες) and distinguished them from both the totally vicious or ignorant and the perfectly virtuous or educated is further attested by Proclus.⁹⁵ The vicious, according to his fragment, blame others for their own misery; those who are making progress blame only themselves for their errors; the virtuous accuse neither others nor themselves, because they do not err and are not miserable. This is why Diogenes Laertius reports that for the Stoic there was no intermediate state between virtue and vice because an action is either virtuous or vicious, while a fragment of Zeno attests that the founder of the Stoa admitted of the possibility of progress. Consequently, in Mara’s passage under consideration, according to the interpretation I have proposed, i.e. “progress in it is with heavy labor,” Mara would be underlining the difficulties of προκόπτοντες in the world.

Mara’s Letter also contains Stoic theories of emotions. Mara says, in reference to one’s children: “We suffer injury from both things working together: when they are

91 *Fin.* 3.14.48: “Ut enim qui demersi sunt in aqua nihilo magis respirare possunt, si non longe absunt a summo ut iam iamque possint emergere, quam si etiamtum essent in profundo, nec catulus ille qui iam appropinquat ut videat plus cernit quam is qui modo est natus, item qui processit aliquantum ad virtutis habitum nihilominus in miseria est quam ille qui nihil processit.”

92 SVF 3.539:143.

93 SVF 3.532:142, from Cicero *Fin.* 4.9.21.

94 Thus, in SVF 3.534:142 it is rightly stated that the Stoics, i.e., the Old Stoics, “grant virtue only to perfect philosophy, whereas the Peripatetics and others grant this honor also to those who are imperfect” (see also 3.510:137–138).

95 In SVF 3.543:145.

upright, their love torments us and we are *afflicted* by their behavior, but when they are corrupt, we grow weary of their rebelliousness and are agonized by their depravity.”⁹⁶ Why does Mara state that “we are afflicted” or “suffer injury” even from being conquered by our children’s upright behavior? Because being conquered by someone’s behavior, just as being tormented by love, is a passion (πάθος, i.e. a passion or bad emotion) for the Stoics. In the Stoic perspective, all πάθη, unlike εὐπάθειαι or good emotions and προπάθειαι or pre-passions,⁹⁷ are evaluated negatively. Good emotions, εὐπάθειαι,⁹⁸ are those experienced by sages, and only by them, as opposed to bad emotions or πάθη, which are excessive in nature (thereby irrational) and are experienced by those who fall short of wisdom.

Chrysippus in his *On Passions* described εὐπάθειαι as εὐλογοὶ ὄρμαι, or rational impulses, whereas πάθη are ἄλογοι or irrational ὄρμαι.⁹⁹ Among the impulses experienced by humans, some are practical, in that they concern a future object and involve an action that is still to be accomplished, while others are non-practical and concern a present object. Practical impulses of the irrational kind constitute the πάθη of ἐπιθυμία and φόβος, desire and fear: the former derives from an inclination toward something, whereas the latter derives from a repulsion. The corresponding rational impulses or εὐπάθειαι are, respectively, βούλησις and εὐλάβεια, or will and circumspection. Non-practical impulses of the irrational kind (πάθη) are ἡδονή and λύπη, the former again the consequence of an inclination toward something, the latter of a repulsion or movement away. Χαρά is the rational counterpart of ἡδονή, while λύπη has no rational counterpart. Thus, the Stoic εὐπάθειαι fall under just three heads, rather than four, as in the case of πάθη.¹⁰⁰

The idea that human beings are mortal, already underlined above as a major feature of the letter in its rejecting an eternity of immortality, is consistent with Stoicism. This set of notions is indeed Stoic: (a) There is no personal afterlife, (b) virtue/wisdom is sufficient for living well (23-31), (c) the emotions are to be eradicated rather than mitigated (*apatheia* preferred to *metriopatheia*), and (d) God and Fate determine choices and events for individuals and nations alike.

96 § 7.

97 On Stoic προπάθειαι see Margaret Graver, *Stoicism and Emotion* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 85-100, who rightly distinguishes feelings and affective responses to them, as a result of judgment (i.e., emotions proper).

98 SVF 3.431 = Diogenes Laertius 7.116. See Ilaria Ramelli’s notes to this paragraph in *Diogene Laerzio, Vite e dottrine dei più celebri filosofi*, in collaboration with Giovanni Reale and Giuseppe Girgenti (Milan: Bompiani, 2005).

99 SVF 3.389. On εὐπάθειαι Graver, *Stoicism and Emotions*, 35-60.

100 Cf. Diogenes Laertius 7.115-16; SVF 3.391 = Ps. Andronicus Περί παθῶν 1. See my “The Importance of the Study of Ancient Syriac Culture for a Scholar in Ancient Philosophy and Religions,” in *Syriac Identity*, ed. Zafer Duygu and Kutlu Akalın (Mardin Artuklu University, forthcoming).

Conclusion: Religious and Philosophical Competition in Early Imperial Times and Disaster Theories

This document, apparently composed by a Stoicizing thinker and full of Stoic, as well as sapiential, ideas, includes a theological explanation of disasters also similar to those offered in Stoicism. It might be the first application of a Stoicizing theory of disasters to the case of Jesus of Nazareth, his execution, and its perceived consequences. In any case, this theorization is embedded within one of the first assimilations of Jesus to unjustly persecuted philosophers, which from the second century CE onward became well attested in Christian circles.

Irrespective of the non-Christian nature of this letter (if by Mara himself) or its possibly Christian nature (if it was a later forgery or rhetorical exercise),¹⁰¹ the new element that this document adds in term of religious and religious-philosophical competition consists in the inclusion of Jesus Christ, “the wise king of the Jews,” among famous Greek philosophers, such as Socrates and Pythagoras, who were unjustly killed but both avenged and rewarded by God.

This element could be used both by a Christian and by a ‘pagan’ Stoicizing author, who considered Jesus as a wise man, unjustly put to death, but still alive in the new laws that he had promulgated. Both a Christian and a Stoic (who likely heard of Jesus’ execution from Christian sources) could appropriate Jesus’ story and interpret it in their own construction of theories of disasters, which offered competing explanations of dreadful phenomena, both on the individual and on the collective plane alike.

101 This hypothesis is not proved, but I am not entering the whole debate here.