

B. P. Pratten, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, pp. 735-738

A Letter of Mara, Son of Serapion.¹

Mara, son of Serapion, to Serapion, my son: peace.

When thy master and guardian wrote me a letter, and informed me that thou wast very diligent in study, though so young in years, I blessed God that thou, a little boy, and without a guide to direct thee, hadst begun in good earnest; and to myself also this was a comfort--that I heard of thee, little boy as thou art, as displaying such greatness of mind and conscientiousness:² a character which, in the case of many who have begun well, has shown no eagerness to continue.

On this account, lo, I have written for thee this record, touching that which I have by careful observation discovered in the world. For the kind of life men lead has been carefully observed by me. I tread the path of learning,³ and from the study of Greek philosophy⁴ have I found out all these things, although they suffered shipwreck when the birth of life took place.⁵

Be diligent, then, my son, in attention to those things which are becoming for the free,⁶ so as to devote thyself to learning, and to follow after wisdom; and endeavour thus to become confirmed in those habits with which thou hast begun. Call to mind also my precepts, as a quiet person who is fond of the pursuit of learning. And, even though such a life should seem to thee very irksome, yet when thou hast made experience of it for a little while, it will become very pleasant to thee: for to me also it so happened. When, moreover, a person has left his home, and is able still to preserve his previous character, and properly does that which it behoves him to do, he is that chosen man who is called "the blessing of God," and one who does not find aught else to compare with his freedom.⁷ For, as for those persons who are called to the pursuit of learning, they are seeking to extricate themselves from the turmoils of time; and those who take hold upon wisdom, they are clinging to the hope of righteousness; and those who take their stand on truth, they are displaying the banner of their virtue; and those who cultivate philosophy, they are looking to escape from the vexations of the world. And do thou too, my son, thus wisely behave thyself in regard to these things, as a wise person who seeks to spend a pure life; and beware lest the gain which many hunger after enervate thee, and thy mind turn to covet riches, which have no stability. For, when they are acquired by fraud, they do not continue; nor, even when justly obtained, do they last; and all those things which are seen by thee in the world, as belonging to that which is only for a little time, are destined to depart like a dream: for they are but as the risings and settings of the seasons.

About the objects of that vainglory, too, of which the life of men is full, be not thou solicitous: seeing that from those things which give us joy there quickly comes to us harm. Most especially is this the case with the birth of beloved children. For in two respects it plainly brings us harm: in the case of the virtuous, our very affection for them torments us, and from their very excellence of character we suffer torture; and, in the case of the vicious, we are worried with their correction, and afflicted with their misconduct.

Thou hast heard,⁸ moreover, concerning our companions, that, when they were leaving Samosata, they were distressed about it, and, as if complaining of the time in which their lot was cast, said thus: "We are now far removed from our home, and we cannot return again to our

¹[Elucidation I. p. 742, *infra*. See p. 722, *supra*.]

²Lit. "good conscience."

³Or, "my daily converse is with learning." So Dr. Payne Smith is inclined to take these difficult words, supplying, as Cureton evidently does, the pronoun *ⲛⲓ*. The construction would be easier if we could take the participle *ⲙⲁⲛⲁ* as a passive, and render: "It (the kind of life men lead) has been explored by me by means of study."

⁴Lit. "Graecism."

⁵The meaning probably is, that the maxims referred to lost their importance for him when he entered upon the new life of a Christian (so Cureton), or their importance to mankind when Christianity itself was born into the world. But why he did not substitute more distinctive Christian teaching is not clear. Perhaps the fear of persecution influenced him.

⁶That is, the matters constituting "a liberal education."

⁷Cureton's less literal rendering probably gives the true sense: "with whose liberty nothing else can be compared."

⁸Cureton: "I have heard." The unpointed text is here ambiguous.

city, or behold our people, or offer to our gods the greeting of praise." Meet was it that that day should be called a day of lamentation, because one heavy grief possessed them all alike. For they wept as they remembered their fathers, and they thought of their mothers¹ with sobs, and they were distressed for their brethren, and grieved for their betrothed whom they had left behind. And, although we had heard that their² former companions were proceeding to Seleucia, we clandestinely set out, and proceeded on the way towards them, and united our own misery with theirs. Then was our grief exceedingly violent, and fitly did our weeping abound, by reason of our desperate plight, and our wailing gathered itself into a dense cloud,³ and our misery grew vaster than a mountain: for not one of us had the power to ward off the disasters that assailed him. For affection for the living was intense, as well as sorrow for the dead, and our miseries were driving us on without any way of escape. For we saw our brethren and our children captives, and we remembered our deceased companions, who were laid to rest in a foreign⁴ land. Each one of us, too, was anxious for himself, lest he should have disaster added to disaster, or lest another calamity should overtake that which went before it. What enjoyment could men have that were prisoners, and who experienced things like these?

But as for thee, my beloved, be not distressed because in thy loneliness thou hast⁵ been driven from place to place. For to these things men are born, since they are destined to meet with the accidents of time. But rather let thy thought be this, that to wise men every place is alike, and that in every city the good have many fathers and mothers. Else, if thou doubt it, take thee a proof from what thou hast seen thyself. How many people who know thee not love thee as one of their own children; and what a host of women receive thee as they would their own beloved ones! Verily, as a stranger thou hast been fortunate; verily, for thy small love many people have conceived an ardent affection for thee.

What, again, are we to say concerning the delusion⁶ which has taken up its abode in the world? Both by reason of toil⁷ painful is the journey through it, and by its agitations are we, like a reed by the force of the wind, bent now in this direction, now in that. For I have been amazed at many who cast away their children, and I have been astonished at others who bring up those that are not theirs. There are persons who acquire riches in the world, and I have also been astonished at others who inherit that which is not of their own acquisition. Thus mayest thou understand and see that we are walking under the guidance of delusion.

Begin and tell us, O wisest of men,⁸ on which of his possessions a man can place reliance, or concerning what things he can say that they are such as abide. Wilt thou say so of abundance of riches? they are snatched away. Of fortresses? they are spoiled. Of cities? they are laid waste. Of greatness? it is brought down. Of magnificence? it is overthrown. Of beauty? it withers. Or of laws? they pass away. Or of poverty? it is despised. Or of children? they die. Or of friends? they prove false. Or of the praises of men? jealousy goes before them.

Let a man, therefore, rejoice in his empire, like Darius; or in his good fortune, like Polycrates; or in his bravery, like Achilles; or in his wife, like Agamemnon; or in his offspring, like Priam; or in his skill, like Archimedes; or in his wisdom, like Socrates; or in his learning, like Pythagoras; or in his ingenuity, like Palamedes;--the life of men, my son, departs from the world, but their praises and their virtues abide for ever.

Do thou, then, my little son, choose thee that which fadeth not away. For those who occupy themselves with these things are called modest, and are beloved, and lovers of a good name.

When, moreover, anything untoward befalls thee, do not lay the blame on man, nor be angry against God, nor fulminate against the time thou livest in.

If thou shalt continue in this mind, thy gift is not small which thou hast received from God, which has no need of riches, and is never reduced to poverty. For without fear shalt thou pass thy life,⁹ and with rejoicing. For fear and apologies for one's nature belong not to the wise, but to such as walk contrary to law. For no man has even been deprived of his wisdom, as of his property.

Follow diligently learning rather than riches. For the greater are one's possessions, the greater is the evil attendant upon them. For I have myself observed that, where a man's goods are many, so also are the tribulations which happen to him; and, where luxuries are accumulated, there also do sorrows congregate; and, where riches are abundant, there is stored up the bitterness of many a year.

¹Read **ⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ**, instead of **ⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓⲛⲁ**, "peoples."

²Perhaps "our" is meant.

³Cureton: "and the dark cloud collected our sighs." But the words immediately following, as well as the fact that in each of the clauses the nominative is placed last, favours the rendering given.

⁴Lit., "borrowed."

⁵Lit., "because thy loneliness has."

⁶Or "error." He may refer either to the delusion of those who pursue supposed earthly good, or to the false appearances by which men are deceived in such pursuit.

⁷For **ⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ** read **ⲁⲓⲛⲁ**.

⁸Cureton: "A sage among men once began to say to us." This would require **ⲁⲓⲛⲁ**, not **ⲁⲓⲛⲁⲓ**.

⁹**ⲁⲓⲛⲁ**.

If, therefore, thou shalt behave with understanding, and shalt diligently watch over thy conduct, God will not refrain from helping thee, nor men from loving thee.

Let that which thou art able to acquire suffice thee; and if, moreover, thou art able to do without property, thou shalt be called blessed, and no man whatsoever shall be jealous of thee.

And remember also this, that nothing will disturb thy life very greatly, except it be the love of gain; and that no man after his death is called an owner of property: because it is by the desire of this that weak men are led captive, and they know not that a man dwells among his possessions only in the manner of a chance-comer, and they are haunted with fear because these possessions are not secured to them: for they abandoned that which is their own, and seek that which is not theirs.

What are we to say, when the wise are dragged by force by the hands of tyrants, and their wisdom is deprived of its freedom¹ by slander, and they are plundered for their superior intelligence, without the opportunity of making a defence? They are not wholly to be pitied. For what benefit did the Athenians obtain by putting Socrates to death, seeing that they received as retribution for it famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, seeing that in one hour the whole² of their country was covered with sand? Or the Jews by the murder of their Wise King, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven away from them? For with justice did God grant a recompense to the wisdom of all three of them. For the Athenians died by famine; and the people of Samos were covered by the sea without remedy; and the Jews, brought to desolation and expelled from their kingdom, are driven away into every land. Nay, Socrates did "not" die, because of Plato; nor yet Pythagoras, because of the statue of Hera; nor yet the Wise King, because of the new laws which he enacted.

Moreover I, my son, have attentively observed mankind, in what a dismal state of ruin they are. And I have been amazed that they are not utterly prostrated³ by the calamities which surround them, and that even their wars⁴ are not enough for them, nor the pains they endure, nor the diseases, nor the death, nor the poverty; but that, like savage beasts, they must needs rush upon one another in their enmity, trying which of them shall inflict the greater mischief on his fellow. For they have broken away from the bounds of truth, and transgress all honest laws, because they are bent on fulfilling their selfish desires; for, whensoever a man is eagerly set on obtaining that which he desires, how is it possible that he should fitly do that which it behoves him to do? and they acknowledge no restraint,⁵ and but seldom stretch out their hands towards truth and goodness, but in their manner of life behave like the deaf⁶ and the blind. Moreover, the wicked rejoice, and the righteous are disquieted. He that has, denies that he has; and he that has not, struggles to acquire. The poor seek help, and the rich hide their wealth, and every man laughs at his fellow. Those that are drunken are stupefied, and those that have recovered themselves are ashamed.⁷ Some weep, and some sing; and some laugh, and others are a prey to care. They rejoice in things evil, and a man that speaks the truth they despise.

Should a man, then, be surprised when the world is seeking to wither him with its scorn, seeing that they and he have not one and the same manner of life? "These" are the things for which they care. One of them is looking forward to the time when in battle he shall obtain the renown of victory; yet the valiant perceive not by how many foolish objects of desire a man is led captive in the world. But would that for a little while self-repentance visited them! For, while victorious by their bravery, they are overcome by the power of covetousness. For I have made trial of men, and with this result: that the one thing on which they are intent, is abundance of riches. Therefore also it is that they have no settled purpose; but, through the instability of their minds, a man is of a sudden cast down from his elation of spirit to be swallowed up with sadness. They look not at the vast wealth of eternity, nor consider that every visitation of trouble is conducting us all alike to the same final period. For they are devoted to the majesty of the belly, that huge blot on the character of the vicious.

Moreover, as regards this letter which it has come into my mind to write to thee, it is not enough to read it, but the best thing is that it be put in practice.⁸ For I know for myself, that when thou shalt have made experiment

¹Lit., "made captive."

²For **حلم** read **حلم**.

³No verb is found in the lexicons to which **عزل** can be referred. It may perhaps be Eshtaphel of a verb **حف**, cognate with **حف**, "to be bent."

⁴For **قتل** read **قتل**.

⁵Or "moderation."

⁶Cureton: "dumb." The word **سوت** has both senses.

⁷Or "penitent."

⁸So Dr. Payne Smith, who is inclined to take **ما** **حتم** in the sense, "it goes before, it is best, with respect to it." Cureton translates, "it should also proceed to practice," joining **ما** with the participle just mentioned; whereas Dr. Smith connects it with **ما**, thus: "but that it should be put in practice is best with respect to it."

of this mode of life, it will be very pleasant to thee, and thou wilt be free from sore vexation; because it is only on account of children that we tolerate riches.¹

Put, therefore, sadness away from thee, O most beloved of mankind,--a thing which never in anywise benefits a man; and drive care away from thee, which brings with it no advantage whatsoever. For we have no resource or skill that can avail us--nothing but a great mind able to cope with the disasters and to endure the tribulations which we are always receiving at the hands of the times. For at these things does it behove us to look, and not only at those which are fraught with rejoicing and good repute.

Devote thyself to wisdom, the fount of all things good, the treasure that faileth not. There shalt thou lay thy head, and be at ease. For this shall be to thee father and mother, and a good companion for thy life.

Enter into closest intimacy with fortitude and patience, those virtues which are able successfully to encounter the tribulations that befall feeble men. For so great is their strength, that they are adequate to sustain hunger, and can endure thirst, and mitigate every trouble. With toil, moreover, yea even with dissolution, they make right merry.

To these things give diligent attention, and thou shalt lead an untroubled life, and I also shall have comfort,² and thou shalt be called "the delight of his parents."

For in that time of yore, when our city was standing in her greatness, thou mayest be aware that against many persons among us abominable words were uttered; but for ourselves,³ we acknowledged long ago that we received love, no less than honour, to the fullest extent from the multitude of her people: it was the state of the times only that forbade our completing those things which we had resolved on doing.⁴ And here also in the prison-house we give thanks to God that we have received the love of many: for we are striving to our utmost to maintain a life of sobriety and cheerfulness;⁵ and, if anyone drive us by force, he will but be bearing public testimony against himself, that he is estranged from all things good, and he will receive disgrace and shame from the foul mark of shame that is upon him. For we have shown our truth--that truth which in our now ruined kingdom we possessed not.⁶ But, if the Romans shall permit us to go back to our own country, as called upon by justice and righteousness to do, they will be acting like humane men, and will earn the name of good and righteous, and at the same time will have a peaceful country in which to dwell: for they will exhibit their greatness when they shall leave us free men, and we shall be obedient to the sovereign power which the time has allotted to us. But let them not like tyrants, drive us as though we were slaves. Yet, if it has been already determined what shall be done, we shall receive nothing more dreadful than the peaceful death which is in store for us.

But thou, my little son, if thou resolve diligently to acquaint thyself with these things, first of all put a check on appetite, and set limits to that in which thou art indulging. Seek the power to refrain from being angry; and, instead of yielding to outbursts of passion, listen to the promptings of kindness.

For myself, what I am henceforth solicitous about is this--that, so far as I have recollections of the past, I may leave behind me a book containing them, and with a prudent mind finish the journey which I am appointed to take, and depart without suffering out of the sad afflictions of the world. For my prayer is, that I may receive my dismissal; and by what kind of death concerns me not. But, if any one should be troubled or anxious about this, I have no counsel to give him: for yonder, in the dwelling-place of all the world, will he find us before him.

One of his friends asked Mara, son of Serapion, when in bonds at his side: "Nay, by thy life, Mara, tell me what cause of laughter thou hast seen, that thou laughest." "I am laughing," said Mara, "at Time: [3494] inasmuch as, although he has not borrowed any evil from me, he is paying me back."

Here endeth the letter of Mara, son of Serapion.

¹This appears to show that the life of learned seclusion which he has been recommending is one of celibacy--monasticism.

²Or, "and thou shalt be to me a comfort," as Cureton.

³That is, "myself."

⁴Such appears to be the sense of this obscure passage. The literal rendering is, "We acknowledged of old that we received equal love and honour to the fullest extent from her multitude" (or, from her greatness); "but the time forbade our completing those things which were already accomplished in our mind." What things he refers to (for his words seem to have a particular reference) is not clear. The word rendered "greatness," or "multitude," is in reality two words in pointedmss. Here it does not appear, except from the sense, which is intended.

⁵Lit., "We are putting ourself to the proof to see how far we can stand in wisdom," etc.

⁶"This is a very hopeless passage....Perhaps the codex has **مهدس**, 'the kingdom of our ruin,' i.e., the ruined country in which we used to dwell. For possibly it refers to what he has said before about the ruined greatness of his city, captured by the Romans. I suppose Mara was a Persian."--Dr. Payne Smith.