



[The Book of the Laws of the Countries 52-53](#)

Roman identity as characterised by violence

Name of the author: Bardaisan? Philippus?

Date: 3d CE to 3d CE

Place: Edessa

Language: Syriac

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Discourse

Title of work: The Book of the Laws of the Countries

Reference: 52-53

Commentary:

The *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (*BLC*), also known as the *Dialogue on Fate*, is a Syriac dialogue traditionally thought to have been authored by Bardaisan (or Bardesanes in the Greek form), a second-third century aristocratic Christian teacher from Edessa (born 154 CE, died 222 CE, according to Syriac chronicles), who trained in Greek philosophy, was also a talented musician who set poems to music, and spent much of his life at the court of the Parthian King Abgar VIII the Great (179-214 CE) (on Edessa's culture and religion during Bardaisan's time, see Drijvers, *Cults and Beliefs at Edessa*; Denzey, "Bardaisan of Edessa," p. 161-163, see p. 165-180 for a concise discussion of Bardaisan's philosophy, cosmology, anthropology, and how these interacted with his Christian thought; for a detailed discussion of the place of Greco-Roman philosophy in the *BLC*, particularly in relation to ethics, see Robertson, "Greco-Roman Ethical Philosophical Influences"). Bardaisan is known primarily through the words of his opponents from later centuries, who viewed him as a heretic (Denzey, "Bardaisan of Edessa," p. 159; the fourth century writer Ephrem is our primary source for Bardaisan's ideas outside the *BLC*; on Ephrem's presentation of Bardaisan's life and teachings, see Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, p. 127-165; Denzey, "Bardaisan of Edessa," p. 160). The text presents theological teaching offered by Bardaisan in response to questions by his students, three of whom are named as Awida, who acts as the main intellectual questioner of Bardaisan, Philippus, and Bar Yamma. The second of these, Philippus, has also been suggested as a possible author for the *BLC*, based upon the fact that his responses to Bardaisan are given in the first person. However, most of the text consists of Bardaisan's speeches (see Dirk Bakker, "Bardaisan's *Book of the Laws of the Countries*," p. 11; Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, p. 67, 75; Denzey, "Bardaisan of Edessa," p. 159, who subscribes to the theory of Philippus as author). Although we possess only one manuscript for the *BLC* (British Library Add. 14.658), which came from a Syrian convent in Egypt and dates probably to the sixth or seventh century, the text is also witnessed in part from citations in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Preparation for the Gospel* and the *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*, both of which are written in Greek, leading to some discussion as to whether these authors translated an original Syriac *BLC* into Greek, or if the text was originally Greek and subsequently translated into Syriac (early scholars were split on this issue; for a summary and bibliography, see Bakker, "Bardaisan's *Book of the Laws of the Countries*," p. 15-16). Syriac is probably more likely given Bardaisan's provenance.

In brief, the *BLC* comprises of a theological discussion, styled as a "Hellenistic-style dialogue" between Bardaisan and his pupils (Denzey, "Bardaisan of Edessa," p. 159). It begins with the topic of theodicy, Bardaisan teaching that God wishes human beings to have free will and be accountable for their actions. It is this which distinguishes humans from other living beings, despite the fact that all are subject to nature and fate. Nature, it is argued, equals the characteristics defining each species, such as what they eat, for instance. Fate is what determines the way nature is put into practice, so, for example, precisely where a being is born. Moreover, fate is understood to be closely related to the movement of the stars and planets. In this sense, Bardaisan might be understood as a "Christian astrologer" (Denzey, "Bardaisan of Edessa," p. 159). Each of these three principles—free will, nature, and fate—have a strong bearing on human actions, yet free will has an especially strong influence, as people can decide to go against their natural inclinations, particularly towards sin. Nonetheless, nature and fate will often overpower free will; humans cannot simply choose not to get ill and die, for example (for a more detailed presentation of the arguments in the *BLC* as a whole, see Drijvers, *Bardaisan of Edessa*, p. 76-95; for a detailed discussion of Bardaisan's understanding of fate, astrology, and theology, see Possekkel, "Bardaisan and Origen on Fate," p. 523-530). As Denzey recognises, however, and importantly for our purposes, the discussion also enabled the author to show his "knowledge of other cultures' laws, religions, and traditions" ("Bardaisan of Edessa," p. 159). The present passage fits into this wider argument, framing part of a lengthy section of the text that gives it



its title, outlining the laws and customs which different peoples in different parts of the world have given themselves.

The section from which the above extract is taken argues that all the residents of a given country observe the same laws and customs, which is not what one would expect if fate were the strongest principle, as all individuals have a different fate, meaning that it would be impossible for everyone in a country to have the same customs. Moreover, fate is connected to astrology, meaning that if everyone in a particular country had the same fate as each other they would have to have been born under the same horoscope, in the same place at the same time, which is of course not the case. The opening of our passage makes this clear: "The truth is, that in all countries, every day, and at all hours, men are born under Nativities diverse from one another, and the laws of men prevail over the decree of the stars." So, the author concludes, free will must be the presiding force which compels people to obey the same laws and customs as their fellow countrymen: "in every country and in every nation all men avail themselves of the freedom of their nature in any way they choose." Among the numerous peoples and habits which appear in the present passage, it is the reference to the Romans which is of course of interest to us. As Possekel notes, during Bardaisan's time Edessa was an independent kingdom "located between the superpowers Rome and Parthia." Roman influence was increasing, although King Abgar VIII kept Edessa's political autonomy while still being a friend to Rome. This sentiment had been expressed by his father King Ma'nu through the minting of a coin identifying him as "friend of the Romans" (see "Bardaisan and Origen on Fate," p. 520, and n. 14). It is interesting, therefore, to see how the author of the *BLC* perceived Rome, and understood the Roman people in relation to others. As Nathanael Andrade has recently argued, the *BLC* obscures the regional diversity of the Roman empire and the "heterogeneity of its provincial populations' social norms, cultural norms, practices, and legal systems." The text follows Greek and Roman ethnographic traditions from before Rome's expansion out of Italy, and sees all the peoples that it mentions as "foreign to Rome" (Andrade, "Romans and Iranians," p. 10). It is uncertain whether the text was composed before or after the Antonine Constitution of 212 CE, which granted near universal Roman citizenship to free members of the empire. At any rate, the notion of Roman citizenship is not to be found within the *BLC*; as recognised by Andrade, "Roman" is a category which is presented as something ethnic, rather than civic. Indeed, in the present passage, the Romans are listed alongside several 'foreign' populations (Andrade, "Romans and Iranians," p. 10).

The Romans are described as "perpetually seizing upon other countries." This greed and rapacity was a characteristic of Rome frequently identified by authors both with pro- and anti-Roman agendas (for example, see [Sallust, *The War with Jugurtha* LXXXI.1](#); [Livy, *History of Rome* XXXI.29](#); [Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus* XXXVIII.3.10-7.10](#); [Tacitus, *Agricola* XXIX-XXXII](#); [Marcus Minucius Felix, *Octavius* XXV](#)). Similarly, the *BLC* "presents the Romans as uniquely aggressive, intrusive, and rigid in the application of their laws" (Andrade, "Romans and Iranians," p. 9). While the Brahmans are defined by their cannibalism, the Persians by incest, and the Britons by polygamy, for example, the Romans are characterised by their need to conquer other peoples (Andrade notes that the Syriac word for customs/laws in this passage is *namusa*, a Greek loan word with the same semantic range as *nomos*; "Romans and Iranians," p. 10). Eusebius's fourth century *Preparation for the Gospel* VI.10 also preserves this passage of the *BLC*, similarly stating that it is not due to fate that the Romans are so pre-occupied with conquering others. Interestingly, however, the same passage in Rufinus's Latin version of the *Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions*, which he translated at the turn of the fifth century, does not include the Romans at all. Andrade suggests that this is indicative of someone being uncomfortable with the critique of the precise manner of Roman conquest at some point in the transmission process ("Romans and Iranians," p. 10). For the author of the *BLC*, however, this was the most striking representation of what it meant to be "Roman" in contrast to what it meant to be Persian, Greek, British, Gallic etc. While Edessa was a "friend to Rome" (see above) and influenced by Roman culture, therefore, evidently a portion of its inhabitants viewed the Roman power as oppressive, and highlighted this through marking Romanness as something ethnic, characterised by forcefulness.

Robertson demonstrates that the *BLC* presents human beings as having managed to create societies with values that often contradict nature, and show human ability to pursue godly virtue. For instance, sections 39 and 41 state respectively that "[humans] are not slaves of physical nature," and they have "established laws in each country by that liberty given them from God." Moreover, ultimately all evil influences will cease, and any violence and rebellions which still occupy human beings will end, with peace established thanks to God. Those who engage in harming one another, it is suggested, do so due to ignorance and foolishness, which God will eventually remedy (section 63) (see Robertson, "Greco-Roman Ethical Philosophical Influences," p. 533). When read alongside the identification in the present extract of the Romans as characterised by seizing other countries, the Romans come out as one such people who persist in foolish violent behaviour. Their choice to repeatedly conquer other nations is one which is entirely contrary to virtue, and fails to live up to human beings' capacity to live an ethical life. The key



point is that because the author of the *BLC* understands the customs and laws of countries as overpowering fatalistic and natural principles, the Romans have made a conscious choice to act in the way that they do. Fate is not responsible for Roman bloodlust and need for power. Rather, their desire to conquer others is something which they have themselves decided will identify them as a people.

Thematic keywords in English:

- [conquest](#)
- [country](#)
- [custom](#)
- [fate](#)
- [law](#)
- [nation](#)
- [peoplehood](#)
- [Roman people](#)
- [Roman power](#)
- [Roman violence](#)

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