



## [Genesis Rabbah 9:13](#)

A positive view of the Roman judicial system

**Date:** 5th CE

**Place:** Syria Palaestina

**Language:** Hebrew

**Category:** Jewish

**Literary genre:** Midrash

**Title of work:** Genesis Rabbah

**Reference:** 9:13

**Commentary:**

This passage from Genesis Rabbah comments on Genesis 1:31, which includes God’s reflection on creation: “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (NRSV). Our source conveys a teaching on the closing portion of this verse that is attributed to Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish (also known as Resh Laqish), a second-generation amora who was active in the third century. Whereas Palestinian rabbinic literature typically offers critical views of the Roman Empire and its legal system (see, for example, [Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:7](#); [Genesis Rabbah 65:1](#); [Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 \[part one\]](#)), this selection presents a more positive approach. This reading is based on the hermeneutic principle that every element of the biblical text, even the conjunction “and” (written as the prefix *vav* in Hebrew), has a significance that merits attention; thus, this midrash states that God’s remark: “Behold it is very good” refers to the kingdom of heaven, but the addition of “and” in the full clause “And behold it is very good” indicates that God’s favorable assessment of creation applies to the earthly kingdom as well. It is noteworthy that, while the term “kingdom of heaven” (*malkhut shamaym*) appears in several sources from the land of Israel prior to the late fifth century (such as Mishnah Berakhot 2:2, 5), this fifth-century midrash is the earliest mention of “the earthly kingdom” (*malkhut ha-haretz*).

Having demonstrated that God’s approval is directed toward both the heavenly and earthly realms, this midrash then questions the latter’s goodness. This source teaches that the favorable evaluation of the earthly kingdom stems from its efforts to ensure justice (*diqyon*, from the Greek *dik?* for humans). While this midrash could broadly be understood generally, in relation to human kingdoms, its concluding verse: “I have made the earth, and created man (from the root ‘-*d-m*) on it” (Isaiah 45:12, NKJV) may suggest otherwise. The noun spelled with the letters of its tri-literal root, ‘-*d-m*, is typically translated as “man” and pronounced *adam*; however, in our text, Resh Laqish (if this attribution is accurate) reads ‘-*d-m* as Edom, which symbolized the Roman Empire. Edom and Rome are often linked in rabbinic texts, especially amoraic midrashim (see, for example, [Leviticus Rabbah 13:5 \[part two\]](#)). If this reading of *adam* as Edom is correct, this source expresses an appreciative attitude toward Rome (or Christian Rome, if its ascription to this third-century sage is erroneous) as a guarantor of justice for the empire. As KatellBerthelot has observed: “The verse may ... be understood to mean that God created the Roman Empire and established its power over the nations of the earth. According to the midrash, the explanation for such a paradoxical divine decision lies in the fact that the Roman Empire ‘exacts justice for the creatures.’ In other terms, it establishes a proper legal order” (“The Paradoxical Similarities,” p. 105). Mishnah Avot 3:2 displays a similar approach:

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Rabbi ?ananya, the chief of the priests, says: “Pray for the peace of the kingdom, for without its authority (or, without fearing it), we would swallow one another (lit. a man would swallow his fellow) alive.”

According to this mishnah, Roman rule provides security for, without its authority, its subjects would destroy one other. Such approval of Rome rarely appears in rabbinic literature from the land of Israel. However, Genesis Rabbah 9:13 echoes Roman imperial ideology, particularly its claim that Rome ensures justice for its empire.

Keywords in the original language:



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Thematic keywords in English:

- [creation](#)
- [earthly kingdom](#)
- [Edom](#)
- [kingdom of heaven](#)
- [Rabbi Hananya the chief of the priests](#)
- [Rabbi Shimon ben Laqish](#)
- [Roman justice](#)
- [Roman rule](#)
- [security](#)

**Bibliographical references:** Berthelot, Katell, "[The Paradoxical Similarities between the Jews and the Roman Other](#)", in *Perceiving the Other in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (ed. Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Wolfgang Grünstäudl, Matthew Thiessen; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 95-109

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