Why Rome Is Likened to a Boar

The Romans were baffled as to why Jews would not eat pork, an idiosyncrasy that became the subject of speculation as well as ethnic humor. In response, Jewish texts highlight the way the hated Romans remind the rabbis of pigs and wild boars.

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Fragment of a tile stamped with the seal of Legio X Fretensis, featuring a wild boar. Yoav dothan / Wikimedia

The taboo against pork consumption has been a defining mark of Israelite and Jewish culture for millennia. Going back to the early Iron Age (1200–1000 B.C.E.), Israelite archaeological sites lack pig bones; and sites of other local Levantines, i.e., Canaanites, have also yielded very few pig bones. In contrast, the main Philistine sites in this period have them in large quantities.[1]

As the Philistines were not natives of Canaan, but Aegean settlers, this fact highlights how variation in pork consumption reflects an early cultural difference between Levantines, like the Israelites and Canaanites, and Aegeans, like the Philistines, Greeks, and Romans. In fact, recent DNA studies suggest that the Philistines either imported their pigs from Europe or even brought their pigs with them when they immigrated.[2] Over time, as the Philistines acculturated to the Levantine environment, pork consumption in these sites decreased.[3]

Almost a thousand years later, when the Greeks conquered the Levant from the Persian Empire in 332 B.C.E., the two cultures met again, but this time, the Judeans were a minority culture in an Aegean world. The Jews’ status as a distinct minority was heightened after the Levant was conquered by Rome in 63 B.C.E.; the same took place in Egypt, another center of Jewish life.

The Greeks and Romans were curious about this unique people living among them, and a number of Greek and Latin authors discuss the differences between Jewish practices and their own practices. One of the distinctive markers that especially stood out for Greeks and Romans is the Jewish avoidance of pork.[4]

Roman Explanations for the Jewish Pork Taboo

The Romans were baffled as to why Jews would not eat pork. In one glaring example provided by Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 B.C.E.–ca. 50 C.E.), who went to speak with Emperor Gaius Caligula as part of a delegation of Jews asking him to intervene against anti-Jewish violence that had broken out in Alexandria, the emperor interrogated the delegation, asking, ‘‘Why do you refuse to eat pork?’’[5]

Many Roman authors sought to provide explanations for why Jews abstained from this particular food. According to the Roman historian and statesman Tacitus (ca. 56–ca. 120 C.E.) the Jews do not eat pork because they once suffered from the same skin disease from which some pigs suffer. Tacitus further suggests that the Jews’ abstinence from pork is reflective of their general disposition to oppose Roman practice:

To establish influence over the people for all time, Moses introduced new religious practices, quite opposed to those of all other religions. The Jews regard as profane all that we hold sacred; on the other hand, they permit all that we abhor . . . They abstain from pork, in recollection of a plague, for the scab to which this animal is subject once afflicted them. They sit apart at meals and they sleep apart, and although as a race, they are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves nothing is unlawful.[6]

While Tacitus knows little about the Jews and is unfavorable in his description, he does know that Jews don’t intermarry, and that they don’t eat pork.

From Confoundment to Contempt

The Roman confoundment with the Jews’ stubborn abstinence from pork became a focus of religious dispute in the writings of some Christian thinkers, who polemicized against the Jews’ tenacious adherence to their ancient prohibitions. In their perception, Jews set ritual laws on a pedestal above all else. According to the 4th century Ionian bishop Arrianus, for instance, the Jews care more about avoiding pork than any other religious precept:

This is the conflict between Jews and Syrians and Egyptians and Romans, not over the question whether holiness should be put before everything else and should be pursued in all circumstances, but whether the particular act of eating swine’s flesh is holy or unholy.[7]

Roman Pork Jokes

The Roman attitude toward Jewish pork-abstention is perhaps best highlighted by their jokes about this Jewish idiosyncrasy.[8]

For example, noting how King Herod of Judea made his many enemies and rivals disappear, including his wife’s brother and two of his own sons, Augustus quipped, “I would rather be Herod’s pig than Herod’s son.”[9] Although the joke was preserved in Latin, it was likely said in Greek, since the word for son (*huia*) and pig (*hua*) sound very similar.[10] The joke only works if the listener knows that Jews do not eat pork, and whereas pigs are safe from Herod, his sons are not.[11]

A similar joke was made about Herod’s great-granddaughter Berenice by the Roman satirist Juvenal (late 1st / early 2ndcent., C.E.), who describes a ring given to Berenice by her brother in the land “where a long-established clemency suffers pigs to attain old age” (*vetus indulget senibus clementia porcis*).[12]

While the Romans mocked Jews for abstaining from pork, the Jews had plenty to say about the Romans and their love of swine.

Romans are Pigs and Boars

The Romans considered pork to be a cultural delicacy, and they consumed pork more than any other meat.[13] As a consequence, and as a response to the negative attention which Romans gave to Jews about their abstinence from this delicacy, the Jews associated Romans with indulging in­­—and even embodying—pork.[14] Indeed, a number of midrashic texts associate Rome with the boar.[15]

For example, the 5th century C.E. midrashic collection known as *Genesis Rabbah* (65) offers a homiletical explanation for why Esau married at forty based on its exegesis of Psalm 80.[16]The psalm speaks of the extreme devastation suffered by Israel, using the metaphor of Israel as a vine, and asks God to restore what the people have lost:

תהלים פ:ט גֶּפֶן מִמִּצְרַיִם תַּסִּיעַ תְּגָרֵשׁ גּוֹיִם וַתִּטָּעֶהָ…. פ:יג לָמָּה פָּרַצְתָּ גְדֵרֶיהָ וְאָרוּהָ כָּל עֹבְרֵי דָרֶךְ.פ:יד**יְכַרְסְמֶנָּה חֲזִיר מִיָּעַר** וְזִיז שָׂדַי יִרְעֶנָּה.

Ps 80:9You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it…80:13Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit? 80:14**The boar from the forest ravages it**, and all that move in the field feed on it.

Who is the wild boar who ravages the Jewish vine? The implicit answer is Esau, whom the rabbis associate with Rome,[17] since it is Rome that destroyed Judea and which rules over the land in the time of the *darshan* (homileticist).[18] The midrash goes on to explain the connection between Esau and the boar (65:1, Theodor-Albeck ed.):

ר’ פינחס ר’ חלקיה בשם ר’ סימון מכל הנביאים לא פירסמוה אלא שנים, אסף ומשה, אסף יכרסמנה חזיר מיער, ומשה אמר את החזיר כי מפריס פרסה (ויקרא יא ז),

R. Pinchas, R. Hilkiah in the name of R. Simon: “Out of all the prophets, only two publicized this, Asaf (=the author of Psalm 80) and Moses. Asaf [said]: “a boar from the forest ravages it” and Moses said (Lev 11:7): “The pig, for it has cloven hoofs.”

למה הוא מושלה בחזיר, אלא מה חזיר הזה בשעה שהוא רובץ הוא מיפשט את טלפיו כלומר שאני טהור, כך מלכות הרשעה הזו גוזלת וחומסת נראת כאילו מצעת בימה

Why is he compared to a pig? Because, just as a pig when he lies down, displays his cloven hooves as if to say, “I’m ritually clean,” so this wicked kingdom steals and commits violence, yet it appears as if they establish courts of law.

כך עשו כל ארבעים שנה צד נשי אנשים מענה אותן, וכיון שהגיע לארבעים שנה דימה עצמו לאביו, אמר מה אבא נשא אשה בן ארבעים אף אני נושא אשה בן ארבעים שנה הה”ד ויהי עשו בן ארבעים שנה ויקח אשה וגו’.

So too [Esau], for forty years he hunted the wives of men and humbled them. And as soon as he reached the age of forty, he compared himself to his father. He said to himself, “Just as dad married at the age of forty, so I will marry at the age of forty.” As it is written, “And Esau was forty years old when he took a wife.”

The midrash reads Esau’s behavior as parallel to Rome’s. What was Esau doing during his years of bachelorhood? He was ravaging married women. Yet, when he marries, he makes it look as if he is an upstanding family man. Similarly, Rome pretends to rule with law and order, but in fact behaves like a rapacious thief, pillaging the peoples that it dominates.

The symbol of such duplicity, the midrash says, is the pig, which “pretends” to be kosher, because of its split hoofs, but is really not, since it does not chew its cud. In other words, the pig has the outward sign of a kosher animal, but inside it is not.

The Roman Boar

By using Psalm 80 as its base text, the midrash does not limit itself to the image of the pig, but includes the pig’s wild cousin, the boar.[19] While the Hebrew term for pig and boar are the same, חזיר, the term, as it appears in Psalm 80:13, should be translated as boar, since the behavior of the חזיר in this verse does not align with the behavior of a domesticated pig, but rather that of the wild boar.

The rabbis saw the boar’s tendency to roam and plunder the hillside as reminiscent of the the destruction and violence wreaked by the Romans, who ravaged the hills of Judea and devastated its population in 69–70 C.E. and again in 132–135 C.E. Moreover, the boar image was likely strengthened by the fact that the tenth legion of the Roman army, Legio X Fretensis (“of the straits”), which took active part in the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E., was known as *the boar*because of its prominent emblem (see the opening image of the article).[20]

The Genesis Rabbah text thus combines two distinct critiques of Rome into one narrative about Esau/Edom/Rome. The verse in Leviticus, which uses pig imagery, is a moral critique of Rome, which claims that they are hypocrites like the pig, pretending to be civilized while really rapacious and destructive at their core. And like other rabbinic readings of the Psalms, which view the Psalms as prophecies which envision watershed moments of Jewish history, this midrash reads the boar imagery of Psalm 80 as a prophecy of how Rome will destroy Judea.

The Pig is Edom

*Leviticus Rabbah*, a collection of aggadic homilies composed slightly after *Genesis Rabbah*, also uses the pig/boar imagery for Rome (*Parashat Shemini* 13:5). The context of this homily is the claim that various prophets, including figures such as Moses and Daniel, foresaw the four nations that would rule the world, and that in each case, the fourth nation is Rome.[21]

The verses attributed to Moses in this midrash are part of the list of ritually unclean animals in Leviticus. According to this homily, the camel represents Babylonia, the rock badger/hyrax represents Media, the hare represents Greece, and the swine represents Rome.

The exegesis of these four animals occurs four times, in what appears to be a collection of homilies on these verses with the same overall theme. The first homily is a version of what we saw in *Genesis Rabbah*, but is focused on Rome and not Esau.[22] After establishing how Rome is like a boar, the midrash narrates the following anecdote:

מעשה בשלטון אחד בקיסרי שהיה הורג את הגנבים ואת המנאפין ואת המכשפין ואמ’ לסנקליטין שלו שלשתן עשה אותו האיש בלילה אחד.

It happened with a certain governor in Caesarea, that he executed thieves, adulterers, and sorceresses, and then said to his counselors: “This man [=himself] did all three of these in one night.”

The comparison to a boar and a pig allows the rabbis to combine the elements of rapaciousness with the hypocrisy of the governor, who prosecutes criminals for their rapacious crimes, and at the same time, is guilty of the very same behavior.

Other Ways Rome Is Like a Pig

Once the comparison between Rome and the pig was established, this connection took on a life of its own, yielding more reasons why Rome is like a pig. Thus, *Leviticus Rabbah*continues with two further criticisms of Rome being pig-like:

את החזיר, זו אדום. והוא גרה לא יגר, שאינה מקלסת לקב”ה, ולא דייה שאינה מקלסת אלא מחרפת ומגדפת ואומרת מי לי בשמים ועמך לא חפצתי בארץ.

“The pig”—this is Edom. “It does not chew its cud”—they do not praise God. Not only do they not praise [Him], but they curse and profane [God], and say (Ps 73:25): “Whom do I have in heaven? And I want not you on earth.”[23]

ואת החזיר, זו אדום. והוא גרה לא יגר, שאינה מגדלת את הצדיקים, ולא דייה שאינה מגדלת אלא הורגת, הה”ד קצפתי על עמי חללתי נחלתי ואתנם בידך, זה ר’ עקיבה וחביריו.

“The pig”—this is Edom. “It does not chew its cud”—it does not raise righteous people. Not only do they not raise righteous people, but they kill them. This is what the verse means (Isa 47:6): “I was angry at My people, I defiled My heritage; I put them into your hands”—this refers to R. Akiva and his colleagues.

The first two *derashot* are twins, playing off of the symbolic meaning of “chewing cud.” An animal which chews its cud displays its healthy physical condition, and the act of constant chewing denotes cultivating a hearty and robust disposition, which the rabbis interpret as either praising God or cultivating righteous people. Each homily then takes a further step, noting that Rome does the exact opposite of these righteous acts: Romans curse God and they kill the righteous.

The pig imagery here is no longer connected to hypocrisy, which is unique to the pig (since it has cloven hoofs but does not chew its cud), and shows that these are later, derivative interpretations of Rome as the pig. But both are still entirely negative.

The Final Days Before the Kingdom of God

*Leviticus Rabbah* adds one further homily on Rome being pig-like, which is different than the previous ones, since in this case, the pig is a hopeful symbol:

ואת החזיר, זו אדום, והוא גרה לא יגר, שלא גררה מלכות אחריה. ולמה נקרא שמה חזיר, שמחזרת עטרה לבעלה, הה”ד ועלו מושיעים בהר ציון לשפט את הר עשו והיתה לי”י המלוכה.

“The pig”—this is Edom. “It does not chew its cud (*gerah*)”—it brought (*gerara*) no kingdom after it. Why is it called a pig (*chazir*)? Because it returns (*mechazeret*) the crown to its master. This is what the verse means (Obad 1:21): “For liberators shall march up on Mount Zion to wreak judgment on Mount Esau; and dominion shall be the Lord’s.”

This midrash is built entirely on world play, and ignores Rome as a character. Instead, it focuses on Rome’s place as the final kingdom after which the age of the Messiah comes, ushering in the end of the days. The *derasha* is not positive about Rome itself, as it quotes Obadiah’s prophecy about God’s eventual judgment of Edom, but it lacks the polemical edge of the previous *derashot*.

It would seem that by the time this *derasha* was written, the idea that Rome was associated with a pig or boar had become a given and that homileticists were looking for fresh angles. Given that Jews had likely been living under Roman hegemony for centuries by the time this midrash was written, it is unsurprising that the writer expresses the hope that perhaps Roman rule was finally coming to a close.

The Jews Strike Back

The rabbinic authors of *Leviticus Rabbah* and *Genesis Rabbah*likely lived in the Land of Israel, whose Jewish residents were subject to increasing suffering under Roman rule, even after the devastating wars of 66–73 C.E. (Great Rebellion) and 132–135 C.E. (Bar Kochba Rebellion). This suffering, coupled with the rabbis’ awareness that Romans accused the Jews of barbarism, generated the interest in associating Rome with a pig and a boar, which served to fling insults about Jewish barbarism back at the Roman Empire.

While Romans thought that Jews were odd because they would not eat pork, the rabbis responded by saying that Romans are themselves pigs. By referring to Romans as rapacious boars and hypocritical pigs, rabbinic writers implied that Rome, rather than being an enlightened society that transcended Jewish superstition, grotesquely embodied the very object of its people’s indulgence.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/why-rome-is-likened-to-a-boar)

1. See, Brian Hesse and Paula Wapnish “Can Pig Remains Be Used for Ethnic Diagnosis in the Ancient Near East?,” in *Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, ed., Neil A. Silberman and David Small, JSOTSup 237 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic 1997), 238–270; Avraham Faust and Justin Lev-Tov, “The Construction of Philistine Identity: Ethnic Dynamics in 12th–10th Centuries Philistia,” *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 30 (2011): 13–31. For a somewhat different interpretation of the data, see, Lidar Sapir-Hen, Guy Bar-Oz, Yuval Gadot, and Israel Finkelstein, “Pig Husbandry in Iron Age Israel and Judah: New Insights Regarding the Origin of the ‘Taboo,’” *ZDPV* 129.1 (2013): 1–20.
2. Meirav Meiri, Dorothée Huchon, Guy Bar-Oz, Elisabetta Boaretto, Liora Kolska Horwitz, Aren M. Maier, Lidar Sapir-Hen, Geger Larson, Steve Weiner, and Israel Finkelstein,[“Ancient DNA and Population Turnover in Southern Levantine Pigs—Signature of the Sea Peoples Migration?”](https://www.nature.com/articles/srep03035) *Nature-Scientific Reports* 3 (2013): #3035. Liora K. Horwitz, Armelle Gardeisen, Aren Maier, and Louise Hitchcock, “A Contribution to the Iron Age Philistine Pig Debate,” in *The Wide Lens in Archaeology: Honoring Brian Hesse’s Contributions to Anthropological Archaeology*, ed., Justin Lev-Tov, Paula Hesse, and Allan Gilbert, Archaeobiology 2 (Atlanta: Lockwood Press, 2017) 93–116.
3. Justin Lev-Tov, “A Plebeian Perspective on Empire Economies: Faunal Remains from Tel Miqne-Ekron, Israel,” in *Anthropological Approaches to Zooarchaeology: Colonialism, Com­plexity and Animal Transformations,*ed., D. Campana, A. Choyke, P. Crabtree, S. D. deFrance, and Justin Lev-Tov (Oxford: Ox­bow Books, 2010), 90–104.
4. See Peter Schäfer, “Abstinence from Pork,” chap. 3 in *Judeophobia: Attitudes Toward the Jews in the Ancient World*(Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997); David Kraemer, *Jewish Eating and Identity through the Ages*(New York: Routledge, 2007), 30–33.
5. Philo, *Embassy to Gaius*, 361.
6. Tacitus, *Historiae*5:4.1–2, trans. in Menahem Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1980), 2:25. On skin disease as the Jewish reason for abstention from pork, see also Plutarch, *De Superstitione*5.3
7. Arrianus, *Dissertationes*, 1.22.4, trans. in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 1:542.
8. For more on this, see Jordan D. Rosenblum, *The Jewish Dietary Laws in the Ancient World* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 35–38.
9. Recorded in Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, 2:4.11.
10. The Latin is “Melius est Herodis porcum esse quam filium*.*” Obviously, *porcum* (pig) and *filium* (son) do not have the same element of verbal pun. The Greek would have read, κρεῖσσον Ἡρῴδου ὗα εἶναι, ἢ υἷα.
11. See discussion in Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors*, 2:665–666, #543.
12. Juvenal, *Saturae,* 6:160, Ramsay translation. See Stern,*Greek and Latin Authors*, 2:99–100, #298.
13. On meat-eating practices in Rome and how these practices relate to Jewish life in the Roman empire, see Jordan D. Rosenblum’s “‘Why Do You Refuse to Eat Pork?’: Jews, Food, and Identity in Roman Palestine,” *JQR* 100.1 (2010): 95–110.
14. Richard Gottheil, M. Seligsohn, [“Edom, Idumea,”](http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/5434-edox-idumea) *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1906).
15. For a detailed discussion of the development of this trope in rabbinic literature, see Misgav Har-Peled, Har-Peled, [*The Dialogical Beast: The Identification of Rome With the Pig in Early Rabbinic Literature*](https://www.academia.edu/3201368/The_Dialogical_Beast._The_Identification_of_Rome_with_the_Pig_in_Early_Rabbinic_Literature_PhD_thesis_March_2013_) (Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2013).

בראשית כו:לד וַיְהִי עֵשָׂו בֶּן אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וַיִּקַּח אִשָּׁה אֶת יְהוּדִית בַּת בְּאֵרִי הַחִתִּי וְאֶת בָּשְׂמַת בַּת אֵילֹן הַחִתִּי.

Gen 26:34 When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath daughter of Elon the Hittite.

1. By doing this, the rabbis paint Rome not as a late-coming conqueror, but as an ancient, intimate, and permanent antagonist. For a discussion of how this association of Rome with Edom took place, see Malka Z. Simkovich, [“Esau the Ancestor of Rome,”](https://thetorah.com/esau-the-ancestor-of-rome/) *TheTorah* (2018).
2. An earlier possible example of connecting Rome with this verse appears in the third century Tannaitic midrash, *Sifrei Deuteronomy* (317):

דבר אחר: “ירכיבהו על במתי ארץ”—זה העולם (הזה) שנאמר: “יכרסמנה חזיר מיער.”

Another interpretation: “He made him ride on the high places of the earth” (Deut 32:13) – this refers to [the] (this) world, as it is said, “The boar out of the wood doth ravage it,” [that which moveth in the field feedeth on it] (Ps. 80:14)

As the midrash seems to be explaining why Israel is downtrodden in the times of the darshan, the boar is likely Rome, but the text does not say this explicitly. It is very possible that the *darshan* is already working with an identification of Rome with the boar/pig, but this is uncertain. See discussion in, Har-Peled, *The Dialogical Beast*, 185–187.

1. The psalm, which depicts a ravaged Israel, may have been composed in the wake of the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians.
2. The connection between this legion's emblem and the fact that the legion was involved in putting down the Jewish rebellion was first suggested in Théodore Reinach, “Mon nom est Légion,” *Revue des études juives*47 (1903): 172–178.
3. For an analysis of this midrash as an anti-Christian polemic, see Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine: History, Messiah, Israel, and the Initial Confrontation,*Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 102–106; Mireille Hadas-Lebel, *Jerusalem Against Rome*, trans. Robyn Fréchet (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 413–416; trans. of, *Jérusalem contre Rome*(Paris: Cerf, 2003).
4. Both *derashot*begin with the same opening:

ר’ פינחס ור’ חלקיה בש’ ר’ סימון מכל הנביאים לא פירסמוה אלא שנים, אסף ומשה, אסף אמ’ יכרסמנה חזיר מיער (תהלים פ, יד). משה אמ’ ואת החזיר.

R. Pinchas, R. Hilkiah in the name of R. Simon: “Out of all the prophets, only two publicized this, Asaf (=the author of Psalm 80) and Moses. Asaf [said]: “a boar from the forest ravages it” and Moses said (Lev 11:7): “The pig.”

למה נמשלה בחזיר, לומר לך מה חזיר הזה בשעה שהוא רבוץ ומוציא טלפיו ואומר ראו שאנו טהור, כך היתה מלכות הרשעה הזו מתגאה וחומסת וגוזלת ונראת כילו שהיא מצעת בימה.

Why is [the fourth nation] being compared to a pig? To teach you that just as a pig when he lies down, displays his cloven hooves as if to say, “I’m ritually clean,” so this wicked kingdom acts haughtily, committing violence and stealing, yet it appears as if they establish courts of law.

The main difference in presentation is that *Leviticus Rabbah*makes no mention of Esau and his story because the context is different. In *Genesis Rabbah*, the homily is meant to gloss a verse about Esau, in *Leviticus Rabbah*, it glosses the verse forbidding pig consumption. It seems likely that the Leviticus verse is the original context and the *Genesis Rabbah* version an adaptation, since both versions include the verse from Leviticus, and the Esau connection is a stretch.

1. This is not the obvious meaning of the verse, which is actually positive, “Whom else have I in heaven? And having You, I want no one on earth.” Nevertheless, the rabbis understand this verse as being recited by Esau and interpret it negatively.