

# Historical Research on Dagon

## I. Library Research

The following information summarizes successful library research on Dagon.

**DAGON:** A Philistine deity. It is commonly admitted that the name *Dagon* is a diminutive form, hence a term of endearment, derived from the Semitic root *dag*, and means, accordingly, “little fish”. The name, therefore, indicates a fish-shaped god. This the Bible also suggests when speaking of the Dagon worshipped in the temple of Azotus (I K., v, 1-7): he had face and hands and a portion of his body resembled that of a fish, in accordance with the most probable interpretation of “the stump of Dagon” (verse 5). From the received text of the Septuagint it would seem that he possessed even feet; however, this sentence, in the Greek translation, shows all the appearances of a gloss. With the description found in the Bible coincides that which may be seen on the coins of various Philistine or Phœnician cities, on most of which Dagon is represented as a composite figure, human as to the upper part of the body, fish-like as to the lower. From this it may well be inferred that Dagon was a fish-god, a fact not in the least surprising, as he seems to have been the foremost deity of such maritime cities as Azotus, Gaza (the early sites of which are supposed to be buried under the sand-mounds that run along the sea-shore), Ascalon, and Arvad. In the monuments—also most probably in the popular worship—Dagon is sometimes associated with a female half-fish deity, Derceto or Atargatis, often identified with Astarte.

A few scholars, however, waving aside these evidences, consider Dagon as the god of agriculture. This opinion they rest on the following statement of Philo Byblius: “Dagon, that is, corn” [the Hebrew word for corn is *dagan*]. “Dagon, after he had discovered corn and the plough, was called Zeus of the plough” (ii, 16). The same writer tells us (in Eusebius, *Præp. Evang.*, i, 6) that, according to an old Phœnician legend, Dagon was one of the four sons born of the marriage of Anu, the lord of heaven, with his sister, the earth. Moreover, on a seal bearing certain symbolic signs, among which is an ear of corn, but not, however, the image of a fish, may be read the name of Baal-Dagon, written in Phœnician characters. It is open to question whether these arguments outweigh those in favour of the other opinion; so much so that the etymology adopted by Philo Byblius might possibly be due to a misapprehension of the name. It should, perhaps, be admitted that, along the Mediterranean shore, a twofold conception and representation of Dagon were developed in the course of time as a result of the presumed twofold derivation of the name. At any rate, all scholars agree that the name and worship of Dagon were imported from Babylonia.

Akkadian tablets inscribed in Egypt circa 1480-1450 B.C. have yielded the names of Yamir-Dagan and Dagan-takala, rulers of Ascalon, and bear witness to the antiquity of the Dagon-worship among the inhabitants of Palestine. We learn from the Bible that the deity had temples at Gaza (Judges, xvi, 21, 23) and Azotus (I K., v, 1-7); we may presume that shrines existed likewise in other Philistine cities. The Dagon-worship seems even to have extended beyond the confines of their confederacy. The testimony of the monuments is positive for the Phœnician city of Arvad; moreover, the Book of Josue mentions two towns called Bethdagon, one in the territory of Juda (Jos., xv, 41), and the other on the border of Aser (Jos., xix, 27); Josephus also speaks of a Dagon “beyond Jericho” (*Antiq. Jud.*, XIII, viii, 1; *De bell. Jud.*, I, ii, 3): all these names are earlier than the Israelite conquest, and, unless we derive them from *dagan*, witness to a wide dissemination of the worship of

Dagon throughout Palestine. This worship was kept up, at least in certain Philistine cities, until the last centuries B.C. such was the case at Azotus; the temple of Dagon that stood there was burned by Jonathan Machabeus (1 Mach., x, 84; xi, 4).

Unlike the Baals, who, among the Chanaanites, were essentially local deities, Dagon seems to have been considered by the Philistines as a national god (I Par., x, 10). To him they attributed their success in war; him they thanked by great sacrifices, before him they rejoiced over the capture of Samson (Judges, xvi, 23); into his temple they brought the trophies of their victories, the Ark (I K., v, 1, 2), the armour, and the head of Saul (I K., xxxi, 9, 10; I Par., x, 10). A bronze demi-relievo of Assyro-Phœnician workmanship would also suggest that Dagon played a prominent part in the doctrines concerning death and future life. As to the ritual of his worship, little can be gathered either from the documents or from Scripture. The elaborate arrangements for returning the Ark (I K., v, vi) may have been inspired more by the circumstances than by any ceremonies of the Dagon-worship. We only know from ancient writers that, for religious reasons, most of the Syrian peoples abstained from eating fish, a practice that one is naturally inclined to connect with the worship of a fish-god.

## II. Biblical Verses

Information taken from the King James Bible

### 1 Samuel 5

1. And the Philistines took the ark of God, and brought it from Eben-ezer unto Ashdod.
2. When the Philistines took the ark of God, they brought it into the house of Dagon, and set it by Dagon.
3. And when they of Ashdod arose early on the morrow, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon his face to the earth before the ark of the LORD. And they took Dagon, and set him in his place again.
4. And when they arose early on the morrow morning, behold, Dagon *was* fallen upon his face to the ground before the ark of the LORD; and the head of Dagon and both the palms of his hands were cut off upon the threshold; only *the stump of* Dagon was left to him.
5. Therefore neither the priests of Dagon, nor any that come into Dagon's house, tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod unto this day.
6. But the hand of the LORD was heavy upon them of Ashdod, and he destroyed them, and smote them with emerods, *even* Ashdod and the coasts thereof.
7. And when the men of Ashdod saw that *it was* so, they said, The ark of the God of Israel shall not abide with us: for his hand is sore upon us, and upon Dagon our god.
8. They sent therefore and gathered all the lords of the Philistines unto them, and said, What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel? And they answered, Let the ark of the God of Israel be carried about unto Gath. And they carried the ark of the God of Israel about *thither*.

9. And it was *so*, that, after they had carried it about, the hand of the LORD was against the city with a very great destruction: and he smote the men of the city, both small and great, and they had emerods in their secret parts.

10. Therefore they sent the ark of God to Ekron. And it came to pass, as the ark of God came to Ekron, that the Ekronites cried out, saying, They have brought about the ark of the God of Israel to us, to slay us and our people.

11. So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines, and said, Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it go again to his own place, that it slay us not, and our people: for there was a deadly destruction throughout all the city; the hand of God was very heavy there.

12. And the men that died not were smitten with the emerods: and the cry of the city went up to heaven.