

## Who Was Dagon in the Bible, and What Happened to This Idol?



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**UPDATED**  
February 03, 2023



A few years ago, I took a trip to India to minister with an Indian pastor there. While we rode through the streets, little shrines dotted the landscape, either alone on the sidewalk or in front of shops. These shrines were colorfully decorated, and they each had a physical statue or image at the center. An idol.

India has many gods and a very detailed and extensive religious system, each with its own backstory and specific powers and role within the religion and universe at large.

In our Western culture, we don't necessarily have shrines to different gods along our streets, but that doesn't mean we don't have idols. We don't need to bow to a physical statue to worship other gods.

Polytheistic idol worship was the norm in the ancient world. The monotheistic system of Israel that forbade physical idols was counter every other culture, and the Old Testament details several examples of Israel's conflict with other nations over this.

One of the most interesting and prominent idols from the Old Testament is the Philistine god **Dagon**. Dagon in the Bible was a major focus of worship in the area, and God dealt with this idol a few times in the historical narrative.

## Who Was Dagon in the Bible?

Dagon in the Bible (also known as Dagan) was one of the oldest deities in Mesopotamia, with evidence as far back as 3,000 BC. Dagon was known as a father of other gods, so he was a major figure of worship of most of the people groups in what we call the Cradle of Civilization, where farming is thought to have first started (also the area some call the Fertile Crescent). Dagon was primarily associated with fertility, including abundant crop harvests, but also dealt with anointing kings and leaders.

As a biblical connection, ancient texts from the region connect Dagon as the father of Baal, another false god highlighted throughout later Old Testament history.

The statue of Dagon was like a large man. **Some depictions of him made him like a merman, a fish from the waist down.** Some scholars have called him a fish god, which seems logical, especially for the Philistines along the coast, but other scholars have disputed it since there's more evidence he was responsible for crops and grain. Even his name is connected to an old noun for "grain."

Dagon in the Bible was worshipped by the Philistines through Judges and the time of Samuel and King Saul.

## How Was Dagon Worshipped?

Dagon had temples all throughout Mesopotamia. In the Bible, the major temples were in the cities of Beth-dagon, Gaza, and Ashdod. He was worshipped through sacrifices and feasts. Sacrifices were common in the ancient world, even to the God of Israel, through food and animals. Israel specifically prohibited the sacrifice of humans and drinking of blood, common to most other religions at the time. It is highly likely human sacrifice was common for Dagon, as well.

One interesting account of Dagon worship had people making a master weapon and sending it as a gift.

In the account of **Samson**, there was singing and dancing to praise Dagon, and part of the worship was to bring Samson up before 3,000 people, mocking him and showing how great their god was to give them victory over the mighty warrior Samson.

## What Happened to Dagon in the Bible?

Dagon is mentioned in two main parts of the Old Testament. First, in **Judges 16** as a part of the Samson account. As a recap, Samson was one of the deliverers (judges) chosen by God, and he beat the Philistines at every turn with his legendary strength. The Philistines couldn't beat him in battle, so they attacked his weakness, foreign women. The infamous Delilah seduced Samson's secret out of him, cutting his hair, and he was captured by the Philistines.

They put out his eyes and put him to work as a slave. In **Judges 16**, while worshipping Dagon and having a huge party, they decide to bring Samson in to humiliate him and gloat over his defeat. Obviously, this was part of the worship of Dagon.

For polytheistic cultures, when nations went to war, it was also understood that the gods of the different people groups also fought, and the Old Testament reveals this in many passages both with Israel and other cultures (Elijah with the prophets of Baal is an excellent example: **1 Kings 18**). With Samson, the Philistines were making a statement. Dagon had beaten Jehovah, Samson's God, and therefore, Dagon was mightier than the God of Israel.

It makes sense that God would respond to Samson's plea to help him one last time. God's assistance in killing the Philistines wasn't about Samson as much as it was to declare which god was stronger. In fact, Dagon wasn't even real, just a human-made idol. God is reality. He is the only one worthy of worship and glory.

The next time we see Dagon dealt with is in **1 Samuel 5**. The sons of Eli, the priest, and leader of Israel, were wicked religious men, and even though the Ark of the **Covenant** went into battle with Israel against the Philistines, God handed Israel a defeat as punishment. The Ark of the Covenant was taken captive by the Philistines. Just like with Samson, the Philistines took the Ark into the temple at one of their city-states, Ashdod. They put the Ark at the feet of the big statue of Dagon as a symbol of their victory. Dagon had beat Jehovah. Right?

It didn't last long. The first morning, the Philistines went into the temple to find the statue of Dagon fallen over and bowing to the Ark. They set the idol back on its feet. The morning after, the idol had fallen again, but this time, Dagon's hands and head had been removed and placed in the doorway of the temple.

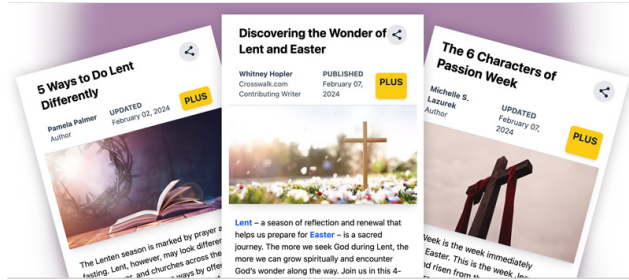
**1 Samuel 5:5** tells us that, from then on, the priests of Dagon wouldn't go near the idol since they were afraid it just fell over. The idol literally had the reputation of falling over and being dangerous!

God wasn't done. People in Ashdod started getting tumors and dying. The epidemic spread to the nearby villages. Philistines were dying left and right, and they were in such a panic that they sent the Ark to the city of Gath. Tumors spread and killed people. Then they sent the Ark to the city of Ekron. You guessed it, more people got tumors and died.

The citizens of Philistia cried out to their leaders to send the Ark back to Israel (mentioning how they shouldn't be as stubborn as Pharaoh in Egypt), which they did (**1 Samuel 6**). They placed the Ark on a cart

pulled by two cows. They even sent it an offering—golden rats and tumors, much like the account of a master weapon as a gift.

With no one driving, the oxen made their way back to Israel.



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Despite the worldview of the Philistines, the defeat of Israel wasn't a defeat of their God. God didn't need the army of Israel to fight for him. He won all on his own.

## Why Should We Know about This Idol?

First, let's understand a little more about idolatry.

Just like my trip to India, and based on most of the biblical testimony, our idea of idolatry is one of statues and worship around those images. We know it's more than that, but have we considered what's at the core of idolatry?

Isaiah gives an interesting, if not hilarious, exploration of idolatry (44:9-20). A craftsman takes metal or wood, makes weapons or cups or burns the wood to warm himself, and then takes the rest of the material and makes a statue of something that he now bows down to worship and says, "You are my god!" He is worshipping something that he manufactured.

Within the Law, a person couldn't build an altar out of cut stone. An altar to God had to be made out of natural stones and rocks, not bricks. In other words, human hands couldn't shape the stones ([Leviticus 26:1](#)). God considered that an evil thing.

Paul stood before the philosophers and idol worshippers in polytheistic Athens and said, "God doesn't live in houses made with human hands" ([Acts 17:24-5](#)). As an aside, people are not made with human hands; they are created by God and made in his image. God can live in us.

What this boils down to is that *idolatry is worshipping what we make with our own hands*. What we can manufacture. What we can imagine. What we can plan. What we can program. What we can do. When we elevate anything that we can do with our own hands in the place of God, that is idolatry.

Money is not evil. But the "love of money" is the root of all kinds of evil ([1 Timothy 6:10](#)). Income and working to make money isn't evil. In fact, godly character is grown in hard work. But to seek money or wealth out of greed is also idolatry ([Ephesians 5:5](#)).



A tree, by the way, is a good thing. God created it and called it good. Enjoying God's creation isn't the problem. He has given us all good things to enjoy (**1 Timothy 6:17**). Perverting those created things and give them a role they were never meant to possess, as Creator, then that is idolatry. We can make an idol out of anything. It doesn't make the substance or thing evil. It's about our hearts.

The real power is the Spirit of God. Not by power or might but by the Spirit (**Zechariah 4:6**). We aren't to trust in armies and horses but in God (**Psalms 20:7**) because God is the only power and the only solution. To elevate our own ability or trust in what we can manufacture is a lie and lies lead to destruction. God loves us too much to participate in that.

In ancient Mesopotamia, they learned to plant crops. Farming fed more people. That's good. Dagon was an idol associated with abundant harvests, essentially worshipping their own skill to feed themselves. That's bad.

The Philistines set the Ark of God at the feet of Dagon, their "father of the gods." That idol failed and people died of tumors.

We may not set up statues and bow down to them like gods in our current culture, but the more insidious form of idolatry can happen to anyone, even pastors and spiritual leaders—the resting in our own ability and talents instead of the grace and power of God. Idolatry is dangerous because we are trusting in things that will fail us. Not might or possibly but *will absolutely fail us*. That failing will lead to our destruction and others.

Like Dagon, the idols we have will come down. To prove that the idol was powerless, God literally removed the statue's hands and threw them across the room. Those powerless hands were the first things that the priests of Dagon saw when they entered that temple.

God will be proved the only power. The Lord of Lords. The King of Kings. Every knee will bow and tongue confess that Jesus is Lord, the ruler, the authority (**Philippians 2:10-11**). He will be glorified. And he will see to it that he is. It's not our job to make sure everyone worships God. Our job is to join in with reality and truth, to root out self-reliance in our own hearts, and praise **him who alone is worthy**. Bow to him alone, no other person or thing. We then have life instead of destruction, a future instead of a tragic end, hope instead of despair.

We then plead with others, beg them, invite them (not force) to worship God now and have eternal life.

Peace.

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Britt Mooney lives and tells great stories. As an author of fiction and non-fiction, he is passionate about teaching ministries and nonprofits the power of storytelling to inspire and spread truth. Mooney has a podcast called **Kingdom Over Coffee** and is a published author of **We Were Reborn for This: The Jesus Model for Living Heaven on Earth** as well as **Say Yes: How God-Sized Dreams Take Flight**.



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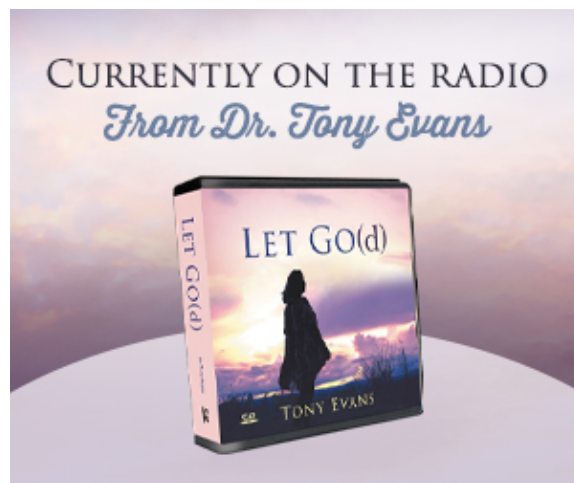


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