

The Pagan God Dagon

Preface: The pagan god, Dagon, is mentioned in only three passages in Scripture, and once in the Apocrypha. In all of those places, Dagon is associated with the **Philistines** and the city of **Ashdod**, a famous city of the Philistines. However, he appears to have been a universal god for a much wider group of peoples. Harold G. Stigers, who wrote one of the articles on Dagon for ZPEB, tells us that Dagon was a storm god from the upper Euphrates area and that conquerors from Mesopotamia brought Dagon into the Palestine and Syrian areas.¹

Topics: Occurrences of Dagon in Scripture
The Possible Meanings of Dagon from the Hebrew
Canaanite Gods
The Cities of Beth-dagon

Charts: Vocabulary Chart

1. The proper noun, *Dagon*, is actually found very little in the Bible.
 - a. When the **Philistines** had captured Samson (after Delilah had cut his hair), they offered sacrifices to their god Dagon in Judges 16:23. Most chronologies separate this incident from our context of I Sam. 5 by a mere 20 years.
 - b. Dagon, the god of the Philistines, is found, obviously throughout our passage, which is I Sam. 5. It is found 11 times in this chapter.
 - c. Dagon will only be mentioned one more time, and also very near this time period. When the Philistines take the bodies of Saul and his sons, they cut off the head of Saul and attached it to the temple of Dagon. I Chron. 10:10. The Philistines will be soundly defeated by David and we will hear of their god Dagon no more in Scripture.
 - d. Finally, Dagon is mentioned in the Apocrypha. I Maccabees 10:83b–84 reads: *They fled to Azotus [Ashdod] and entered Beth-Dagon, the temple of their idol, for safety. But Jonathan burned Azotus and the surrounding towns and plundered them; and the temple of Dagon, and those who had taken refuge in it, he burned with fire.*
2. The **Canaanites** religions taught and practiced such things as human sacrifice, ritual prostitution, homosexuality and self mutilation. They maintained that their gods practiced these same things as well.²
3. These Canaanite gods were often closely associated with various aspects of human life and environment, e.g. the seasons, weather and grain; and always with agriculture (which involves the previous three).³ Many of God's judgments which involved idolatrous people were judgments against the supposed powers of their gods and these judgments would discredit the powers of the Canaanite gods. This is particularly clear in the judgments against Egypt prior to the exodus.
4. According to the NIV Study Bible, Dagon as not strictly a god of the **Philistines**. *Veneration of this deity was widespread in the ancient world, extending from Mesopotamia to the Aramæan and Canaanite area and attested in non-Biblical sources dating from the late third millennium B.C. until Maccabean times (second century B.C.; in the Apocrypha see I Maccabees 10:83–85).*⁴ The god Dagon was a Semitic god who was worshipped in Mesopotamia at least as early as the third century B.C.⁵ Apparently the Philistines adopted him as their chief god.

¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 3.

² *The Complete Word Study Old Testament*; Dr. S. Zodhiates; ©1994 AMG Publishers; p. 647.

³ *The Complete Word Study Old Testament*; Dr. S. Zodhiates; ©1994 AMG Publishers; p. 647.

⁴ *The NIV Study Bible*; ©1995 by The Zondervan Corporation; p. 379.

⁵ Gordon (in *I & II Samuel A Commentary*; Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI; ©1986; p. 336) quotes the sources G. Roux, *Ancient Iraq* (London, 1964), pp. 142, 145; G. Pettinato, *BA* 39 (1976), p. 48 (in this source, Dagon is one of the pantheon at Ebla).. Gordon also suggests to compare Matthiae, *Ebla, An Empire Rediscovered* (ET; London, 1980), pp. 187f.

5. Dagon was thought to have been a fish-god, but more recent discoveries cause historians to believe he was either a storm or a grain god.⁶
 - a. In the Hebrew, our proper noun is dâgôwn (דָּגוֹן) [pronounced daw-GOHN], which is transliterated *Dagon, Dakan*. He is, of course, the god and idol of Philistines. Strong's #1712 BDB #186.
 - b. In our passage, I Sam. 5:4b reads: *...only dâgôwn [Dagon] was left to him*. Some versions read: *...only gêwôw [which might mean his severing] was left to him*. BDB suggests: *...only dâgôw [meaning his fish] was left to him*. The suggestion is that Dagon was half-fish, half-man (which is not unreasonable, given that the Philistines lived so close to the Mediterranean Sea). In the Hebrew, the word for *fish* is dâg (דָּג) [pronounced dawg]. Strong's #1709 BDB #185.
 - c. Barnes tells us that there are *representations of a fish-god on the walls of Khorsabad, on slabs at Konyunjik, and on sundry antique cylinders and gems. In these the figures vary. Some have a human form down to the waist, with that of a fish below the waist; others have a human head, arms and legs, growing, as it were, out of a fish's body, and so arranged that the fish's head forms a kind of mitre to the man's head, while the body and fins form a kind of cloak, hanging down behind.*⁷ There have also been fish-tailed divinities found on coins from *Arvad* and *Ashkelon*,⁸ but these have no direct connection to Dagon, insofar as we know (although Arvad appears to be quite close to the Ugarit temple of Dagon).
 - d. Keil and Delitzsch point out that there is a bas-relief of a half-man, half-fish discovered in Khorsabad and gives two references for this.⁹
 - e. As I mentioned, that the Philistines were a sea people, so the idea that they would worship a *fish-god* is in keeping with their vocation.
 - f. Freeman tells us that representations of a fish-god have been found in the ruins of Nineveh, giving further credence the traditional view. However, there is nothing in our archeological findings which unequivocally tells us that Dagon is some sort of a fish-god.
 - g. The Hebrew word for *grain* is dâgân (דָּגָן) [pronounced daw-GAWN]. Strong's #1715 BDB #186. Also, in *Ugarit*, the word for grain is the same as *Dagon*.¹⁰
 - h. ZPEB does not believe that either of these meanings for *Dagon* (*grain* or *fish*) have anything to do with the pagan god *Dagon*.¹¹ It is reasonably likely that the name *Dagon* did not find its origins in a Hebrew word, but was simply a transliteration from the Philistine language. According to ZPEB, extra-Biblical evidence does not support either of the common interpretations.
 - i. Apparently, in Arabic, the root portion of *Dagon* (*dg*) is the same as the roots for *dagga* and *dagā* (*cloudy* and *rainy* respectively).
 - j. *In Ugarit, Baal the storm god is "son of Dagon."*¹²
 - k. He is called *King of the Land* where the ziqqurat of Mari was dedicated to him.
 - l. On the Babylonian god list, Dagon is equated with Enlil, who was the god of the wind.¹³ ZPEB, on the next page, tells us that this information is from a letter to Zimrilim, circa 1730 B.C.¹⁴ Since Dagon was known as the father of the storm god, this would make sense. There are well over a dozen references

⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*; ©1995 by The Zondervan Corporation; p. 379.

⁷ *Barnes' Notes, Volume 2*, reprinted 1996 by Baker Books; p. 457.

⁸ *The New Bible Dictionary*; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.287.

⁹ Keil & Delitzsch's *Commentary on the Old Testament*; ©1966 Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.; Vol. 2, p. 401. The two references are Stark's *Gaza*, pp. 248ff, 308ff and Layard's *Nineveh and its Remains*, pp. 466–467. That this bas-relief is of a deity is questionable (the man is wearing the ordinary conical tiara of royalty); further, that this is the deity *Dagon* is also questionable. Layard tells us that this is a representation of an Assyrian monarch, probably Sargon.

¹⁰ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 3. They reference Gordon, *Ugaritic Handbook* III, 223, n. 519.

¹¹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2.

¹² *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2. I inserted the comma after *Ugarit* to clarify the meaning here.

¹³ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2.

¹⁴ Their source: Montalbano, "Canaanite Dagon," CBQ, 13: p. 388. You may wonder if there were two different sources for this information. I think that the second article was simply better researched than the first. The first article is on *Dagon* and the second is on *Dagon, Temples of*. The latter article is six times as long with about three times the references.

to Dagon in ancient artifacts which associate him with some weather god or another, either by relation or simple association.

- m. Now, we view weather today from an entirely different perspective than did the ancients. We are concerned whether we will be driving through the rain, whether or not it's a good time for a picnic or a trip to the beach or the snow, or whether or not we can even go out to work. The weather for the ancient world was tied directly to their agriculture, which determined whether a population would live and flourish or languish and die out. The ancients needed the rain in the right amounts at the correct time of the year for their crops to do well; and, obviously, prayers and the like would be offered up to whoever was in charge of the weather, which appears to be Dagon and associates. Because of this tie in between the weather and agriculture, it is not difficult to see Dagon later being associated with agriculture as well.
- n. ZPEB: *In Palestine, he appears to have yielded place as a vegetation fertility god in some locales to Baal, but have held his own against Baal in others.*¹⁵ This observation would indicate that there was some fluidity with the pagan gods and their functions in the ancient world. Our God, Jehovah-Elohim, changes not; however, there is no reason to assume this of a deity who does not exist. Therefore, Dagon could have had several different functions, since he was venerated by different people at different times. For the same reason, his relationships to the other gods is not necessarily written in stone either.

[Return to Chapter Outline](#)

[Return to the Chart Index](#)

- 6. In Canaanite mythology, we have several relationships between Dagon and the other gods. According to Zodiates, archeologists have discovered in recent years that there was a complex pantheon of gods, which included Baal, Ashtoreth, Ashera and Dagon.
 - a. Dagon is either the son or the brother of El and he is the father of Baal.¹⁶ Most of us are actually more familiar with Baal, whose doctrine was covered in Num. 22:41. I was concerned, at first, when I saw the father-son relationship alluded to, for this reason: Satan is the great counterfeiter and he had counterfeited all that is holy. However, I would not have expected him to counterfeit the Father-Son relationship of the Trinity prior to the clear establishment of the Trinity (which is slowly unveiled in Old Testament Scripture). However, in mythology, gods were married to one another and to man, so that offspring would be a natural outcome of these marriages and really not significant with respect to the Trinity. Furthermore, the most reasonable explanation of Gen. 6 is that angels were allowed to co-mingle with man, which would be the actual origin of these gods.
 - b. His female consort was the goddess Shala.¹⁷ *Shala* is written Ša-la-aš, and is probably equivalent to *Sala*, who is said to be the wife of Adad, the weather god.¹⁸
 - c. *In the old Babylonian period in the region of Mari, Dagon was considered the father of the storm god, just as at Ugarit, Baal the storm god is "son of Dagon."*¹⁹
- 7. There are possibly three pagan Philistine temples named in Scripture:
 - a. In Gaza (Judges 16:21–23). However, a careful reading of the cited passage does not indicate that the temple of Dagon was found in Gaza (v. 21) and the Philistines assembled and offered great sacrifices to Dagon (v. 23), which could have been in Ashdod at the temple of Dagon or it could have been there in Gaza apart from any temple of any kind. We have no archeological evidence of a temple here, but that is because excavations have been severely limited.
 - b. In Ashdod. I Sam. 5:1–7. We have found no archeological evidence yet of this temple.

¹⁵ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2.

¹⁶ *The NIV Study Bible*; ©1995 by The Zondervan Corporation; p. 379.

¹⁷ Paraphrased from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2.

¹⁸ Although this comes from *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 3, it is actually written by a different author (this is from a different entry). This author is quoting a work by Montalbano, "Canaanite Dagon," CBQ, 13: p. 388.

¹⁹ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2. I added a comma after *Ugarit* to clarify matters.

- c. Possibly in Beth-shan (or, Beth-shean). I Sam. 31:8–10 I Chron. 10:10. In the first passage it is called the temple of Ashtoreth (whose doctrine was covered in Judges 2:13). However, it is not certain that the Temple of Ashtoreth is found in Beth-shan, as Saul's armor was in the temple of Ashtoreth, his body was hung on a wall in Beth-shan and his head was placed in the house of Dagon—my point being that these three places could be far apart from one another. Now, you recognize that Gaza and Ashdod are both found along the Gaza strip, however, you may wonder, where is Beth-shan? Beth-shan is in the Jordan Valley, barely west of the Jordan, in west Manasseh, just below the border of Issachar and Manasseh. We spent a little time with it in Joshua 17:11, but will cover it in greater detail in I Chron. 10:10. What is important that we need to know about this city is:
 - i. This city was not under Israelite control until the time of David.
 - ii. It was far separated from the rest of the Philistine kingdom.
 - iii. It was either a Philistine settlement or a Canaanite settlement which had close ties to the Philistines during the time of Saul.
 - iv. Although four temples have been unearthed in Beth-shan, none has been definitely identified with Dagon (although ZPEB believes one of them to be a temple of Dagon).²⁰
 - d. There is also a temple dedicated to Dagon located in Ugarit, which will be mentioned later.
 - e. You may immediately wonder about the similarity between the Temple built by Solomon and the temple(s) of Dagon. One primary difference is that, even though there is a “wall of separation” between the worshiper and Jehovah (the Ark), this wall was not of the heavy masonry wall which was found in pagan temples.
8. The influence of Dagon was widespread in the near eastern world, as we have several cities and people named after him:
- a. We have the city of *Beth-dagon* in Judah (Joshua 15:41).
 - b. There is another *Beth-dagon* in Asher (Joshua 19:27).
 - c. The Annals of Sennacherib mention a *Beth-dagon* near Joppa. Since I do not have those annals with me, I don't know if this is equivalent to the *Beth-dagon* in Asher (West Manasseh is situated between Joppa and Asher).
9. Although we find Dagon closely associated with the **Philistines** throughout Scripture, he was worshipped throughout the near eastern world. Assyrian and Babylonia records indicate that Dagon's popularity spanned a period of approximately 1500 years.
- a. According to Douglas, Dagon was worshipped throughout the Mesopotamian area from at least 2500 B.C. on, particularly in the Middle-Euphrates region.²¹ He tells of a temple of Dagon (and says that a picture of same can be found in A. Champdor's *Babylon*, ©1959) which was found there; however, this is not confirmed by any of my other sources.
 - b. Sargon I (circa 2360 B.C.), during one of his campaigns, mentions a stop at Tutuli where he worships Dagon.²²
 - c. Sargon's son, Naram-Sin, conquered the same area, and claimed that it was a gift from Dagon.
 - d. We have archeological remains of a temple of Dagon in **Ugarit**, which is the ancient name of a coastal city off the coast of northern Syria, 50 nautical miles east of the point of Cyprus. We know that this was a temple of Dagon because there were two stelae discovered there which speak of the dedication of the temple to Dagon. Interestingly enough, the temple of Dagon in Ugarit is the same size and orientation as the temple of Baal. The two temples were discovered within 200 feet of one another. In fact, there was an Ishtar temple in Assur which was also unearthed (from the 13th century B.C.), and the inner arrangement of all three temples is remarkably similar. One would enter the holy of holies, and turn to the right to view the altar and the idol, which was on a platform served by a series of steps.²³
 - e. The Amorite form of *Dagon* is *Dagan*, and, as such, the worship of this God by the Amorites predates 2000 B.C.
 - f. There was a temple of Dagan in **Ugarit** which dates back to circa 2000 B.C.

²⁰ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 5.

²¹ The New Bible Dictionary; editor J. D. Douglas; ©Inter-Varsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p.287.

²² Taken from ZPEB, which took this from Gadd-Legrain, *Ur Excavation Texts*, pp. 119, 150.

²³ The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 4.

- g. Apparently there is archeological evidence of his being worshipped by the Amorites in Mesopotamia during *the age of Hammurabi of Babylon and the kingdom of Mari (circa 1850–1750 B.C.)*.²⁴
 - h. Although ZPEB says that *Dagon* was not a *god of grain*, they also tell us that between 1500–1200 B.C., during the Armana Age, that *Dagon was venerated as a grain god at Ugarit*. Also, during that time, *he was considered to be the father of the chief god Baal-Hadd*.²⁵
 - i. A tablet found in Ugarit (possibly the archeological evidence mentioned two points previous) mentions Ashdod, Askelon and Akko as Palestinian cities with which the Ugaritic people traded. Since Dagon appears earlier in history in Syria and later in the Palestine area, we assume that the traders from Ugarit (or that general area of Northern Syria) passed their god, Dagon, along to the Philistines. Now, exactly how such a thing was accomplished is unclear; however, the healthy trade relations could also have resulted in some transplanted Ugarit peoples.
10. The temple of Dagon seems to have existed at least until the time of the Maccabees (I Macc. 10:83–84 11:4). Jonathon Maccabees apparently burned down the temple of Dagon at this time.

Vocabulary Chart	
Arvad	A Phœnician town formerly located on a rock-island off the coast of northern Syria. ²⁶
Ashdod	One of the five principal cities of the Philistines. Ashdod has been covered in a separate doctrine in I Sam. 5:1. Ashdod was later known as Azotus.
Ashkelon	One of the five principal cities of the Philistines. Ashkelon is on the Mediterranean coast less than 20 miles south-southwest of Ashdod.
Canaanites	These were the sons of Canaan (Gen. 10:15), and the tribes included the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites and the Hivites. These people occupied Israel (known as the <i>Land of Canaan</i>) and Syria.
Philistines	A warlike people of Aegean origin who occupied the southern coast of Israel (known today as the Gaza Strip). They were a principal enemy of the Jews primarily between 1200–1000 B.C. Their influence was so great that the name <i>Palestine</i> is derived from the Philistines.
Ugarit	The ancient name of a coastal city in Northern Syria, 50 nautical miles east from the point of Cyprus. The modern name is Ras Shamra, although it appears to function primarily as an archeological dig rather than a principal city (it is not even mentioned in the World Book Encyclopedia).

[Return to Top of Page](#)

[Charts](#)

²⁴ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2.

²⁵ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 2, p. 2.

²⁶ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 1, p. 342.