

Who was Dagon in the Bible?

Dagon was the chief deity of the Philistines, and the worship of this pagan god dates back the third millennium BC. The Ugaritic tablets, a main source of information on Canaanite mythology, seem to have Dagon as Baal's father (www.britannica.com/topic/Baal-ancient-deity, accessed 6/10/24). He was the fish god (dag in Hebrew means "fish"), and he was represented as a half-man, half-fish creature. This image furthered an evolutionary belief that both men and fish had evolved together from the primal waters. Dagon may also have been the provider of grain. So Dagon was similar to many other idols in that he personified natural forces that had supposedly produced all things.

There are three places where Dagon is mentioned in the Bible. The first mention is Judges 16:23, where we are told that Dagon was the god of the Philistines. The Philistines offered "a great sacrifice" to Dagon, believing that their idol had delivered Samson into their hands. First Chronicles 10:10 mentions a temple of Dagon in which the head of King Saul was fastened. Then, in 1 Samuel 5, Dagon is brought to humiliation by the True God of the Israelites.

What an interesting story is found in 1 Samuel 5! The Philistines had captured the Ark of the Covenant, and they "carried the ark into Dagon's temple and set it beside Dagon. When the people of [the city of] Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the Lord! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained. That is why to this day neither the priests of Dagon nor any others who enter Dagon's temple at Ashdod step on the

threshold. The Lord's hand was heavy on the people of Ashdod and its vicinity; he brought devastation on them and afflicted them with tumors. When the people of Ashdod saw what was happening, they said, 'The ark of the god of Israel must not stay here with us, because his hand is heavy on us and on Dagon our god'" (verses 2-7). Who says God does not have a sense of humor? This has to be one of the more funny passages in the entire Bible. For further reading, see 1 Samuel 6 for the account of the Philistines' attempt to solve their dilemma—with golden rats and golden tumors (or, as some translations put it, "golden hemorrhoids")!

Dagon figures into the story of Jonah, as well, although the deity is not mentioned by name in Jonah's book. The Assyrians in Nineveh, to whom Jonah was sent as a missionary, worshiped Dagon and his female counterpart, the fish goddess Nanshe. Jonah, of course, did not go straight to Nineveh but had to be brought there via miraculous means. The transportation God provided for Jonah—a great fish—would have been full of meaning for the Ninevites. When Jonah arrived in their city, he made quite a splash, so to speak. He was a man who had been inside a fish for three days and directly deposited by a fish on dry land. The Ninevites, who worshiped a fish god, were duly impressed; they gave Jonah their attention and repented of their sin.