

# DAGON: THE FISH GOD?

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The Philistine idol *Dagon* captures children's imaginations as it is commonly referred to as a half fish creature, like a mermaid.<sup>1</sup> Few realize that this description has little basis and is debated among commentators.

While the idol is mentioned in multiple places in the Bible, the main text is I Samuel 5. The Philistines capture the Ark of the Covenant and place it in their temple of *Dagon* in Ashdod. The next morning, they find the *Dagon* idol toppled. They put it back in place. Then the next morning they find it toppled and broken.

Rashi (ad loc., v. 2) says that the *Dagon* idol was made in the form of a fish, as does his student R. Yosef Kara (Mahari Kara). There are no talmudic or midrashic sources for this claim. Neither *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Midrash Shmuel* nor the *Ha-Torah Ha-Temimah* compendium of midrash by verse provide any source. However, there is an earlier discussion in a grammatical work.

Menachem Ben Saruk was a famous grammarian whom Rashi sometimes quotes. In his *Mahberet Menahem* (sv. *dgn*), he says that it is unknown whether *Dagon* was so named because it was shaped like a fish or because the word is a general term for idol. Donash Ben Livrat, a contemporary and critic of Menachem, attacks the second suggestion.<sup>2</sup> *Dagon* is definitely not a general term for idol. The general term for idol is *atzabim*, which includes idols made of any material, while *pesilim* are idols made specifically out of wood or stone. *Dagon* may have been the specific name of the Philistine idol but it was not a general term for idols.

Rabbenu Tam, Rashi's grandson, in his work defending Menachem against Donash's critiques,<sup>3</sup> agrees with Donash in this respect, that *Dagon* is not a general term for idol. He adds that this idol could not have been shaped like a fish. The verse specifically says that when the idol was broken, its head and the palms of its hands were on the doorstep (ibid., v. 5). Fish don't have hands! Rabbenu Tam continues: "And if you suggest that it had a fish's shape and human hands, why toil in nonsense to uphold lies that have no basis  
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(legs)?” Rather, he concludes, *Dagon* is merely the name of the idol. Many years later, Ralbag wrote in his commentary that the Philistine idol was “in the shape of man and was called *Dagon*.”

There is an early source for the idea that *Dagon* was a fish god, but it is not a Jewish source. The Church Father Jerome (ca. 390) calls *Dagon piscis tristiae* (sorrowful fish), a combination of the Hebrew words *dag* and *on*. This is the earliest source for the fish identification.<sup>4</sup>

Radak (1160 – 1235) takes a middle position that has become famous. He writes that the idol was shaped like a fish below the navel and a human above. Therefore, it had hands and a human face. In other words, it looked like a mermaid. It is significant that Radak begins this explanation with “they said.” This usually introduces a midrash. However, there is no known source in the midrash for this idea. The textual reason for this interpretation is the cryptic language of I Samuel 5:4, which in describing the broken idol states, *The head and both hands of Dagon were cut off, lying on the threshold; only Dagon remained upon him*. This last phrase is difficult to understand, and Radak explains that it means that the fish part remained intact. However, Targum Yonatan explains that the verse simply means that “the body of *Dagon* remained intact”, an interpretation followed in the *Da’at Mikra* commentary<sup>5</sup> and JPS translation, *Dagon’s trunk was left intact*.

It would not be surprising to learn that a sea-faring people like the Philistines believed in mermaids. However, the evidence that their idol was shaped like a mermaid seems to be entirely based on the similarity between the word *dag* and the name *Dagon*, and the verse referring to the idol’s hands. Rashi (and much later *Metzudat David*) say that the idol was entirely shaped like a fish (presumably with hands) while Rabbenu Tam and Ralbag say it was shaped like a human.

In fact, the deity *Dagon* is understood to be related to the term *dagan* (grain),<sup>6</sup> and is considered to be the Hebrew form of the deity named Dagan, an important Mesopotamian and West Semitic fertility god.<sup>7</sup> Worship of Dagan spread widely, and was adopted in some syncretistic form by a number of groups, including the Philistines. The fact that it was not originally a Philistine god, or a god specifically associated with the sea, calls into question any identification of Dagon with a fish at all.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

1. See, for example Nosson Slifkin, *Mysterious Creatures* (New York: Targum/Feldheim, 2003), p. 124.
2. Herschell Filipowski, ed., *Teshuvot Donash al Mahberet Menaḥem* (London: 1855), p. 58.
3. See *Hakhra'ot Rabbenu Tam*, p. 58, in *Teshuvot Donash al Mahberet Menaḥem*.
4. See *The Conflict Between Good and Evil in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 57, note 2.
5. Yehudah Kiel, *Da'at Mikra – I Samuel* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1991), p. 49.
6. Kiel, p. 49.
7. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, Peter Wiem van der Horst, eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999) p. 216.
8. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, p. 217.



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