

Lesson 4: The Mockery of Dagon

Text: First Samuel Chapters 5-6

In the battle against the Philistines the Israelites had brought along the Holy Ark (4, 3-5). This caused consternation in the Philistine camp, but instead of despairing the Philistines spurred themselves on to fight courageously (4, 9):

Be strong, and quit yourselves like men,
O ye Philistines, that ye be not servants
unto the Hebrews as they have been to you.
Quit yourselves like men, and fight.

הַתְּחַזְקוּ וְהִיוּ לְאֲנָשִׁים
פְּלִשְׁתִּים פֶּן תַּעֲבֹדוּ לְעִבְרִים
כַּאֲשֶׁר עֲבָדוּ לָכֶם
וְהִייתֶם לְאֲנָשִׁים וְנִלַחַמְתֶּם:

They dealt a crushing blow to the Israelite army and succeeded in capturing the Ark (4, 10-11).

Chapters 5 and 6 tell the story of the Ark in Philistine captivity. It is an interesting and charming story. Indeed, some modern commentators believe these chapters contain a homely and simple folk tale. But simplicity of style is not identical with superficiality. An illiterate person who is incapable of sophisticated thought would necessarily think simply. But the mathematical genius, too, would try to present the most complicated problem and solution in a concise and terse formula. The simplicity of the Biblical story is of the latter kind (5, 4):

And when they arose 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 lay cut off upon the threshold;
only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.

וַיִּשְׁכְּמוּ בַבֹּקֶר מִמַּחֲרָת
וַהֲגִה דָגוֹן נִפֵּל לְפָנָיו
אֶרְצָה לְפָנֵי אֲרוֹן ה'
וְרֹאשׁ דָּגוֹן וּשְׁתֵּי אֶפְתָּיו
נִדְּיוּ כְרֵתוֹת אֶל־הַמַּפְתָּן
רַק דָּגוֹן נִשְׁאַר עָלָיו:

Literally the last clause in this verse read: "Only Dagon was left to him." That is to say: It is the same Dagon, the same block of wood, with or without head and hands. Dagon has a head with a mouth, eyes, a nose and an ear. He also has hands. But can Dagon make any use of them? In this simple story the Bible mocks the presumptuous "divinity" of Dagon, the god of the Philistines. The same idea is presented in a more abstract manner in a famous passage of Psalms (115, 4-7):

Their idols are silver and gold,

עֲצָבֵיהֶם כֶּסֶף וְזָהָב מַעֲשֵׂה יְדֵי אָדָם:

the work of men's hands.
 They have mouths but speak not.
 Eyes have they, but they see not.
 They have ears, but they hear not.
 Noses they have but they smell not.
 They have hands, but they handle not.
 Feet have they but they walk not.
 Neither speak they with their throat.

פְּהֵלֵהֶם וְלֹא יִדְבְּרוּ
 עֵינֵיהֶם לֹהֶם וְלֹא יִרְאוּ:
 אָזְנוֹתֵיהֶם לֹהֶם וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ
 אָף לֹהֶם וְלֹא יִרְיָחוּ:
 יָדֵיהֶם | וְלֹא יִמְיִשוּן
 רַגְלֵיהֶם וְלֹא יִהְלְכוּ
 לֹא יִפְתְּחוּ בְּגֵרוֹנֵיהֶם:

The story on Dagon carries an obvious prophetic message, only it is couched in an epic style.

The pagans believed that each people has a god of its own. The victory of one people over another implied, accordingly, the victory of the strong god over the weaker god. In our story the Philistines represent this pagan view that was widely held in antiquity (5, 2):

And the Philistines took the Ark of God
 and brought it into the house of Dagon
 and set it by Dagon.

וַיִּקְחוּ פְּלִשְׁתִּים אֶת־אֲרוֹן הָאֱלֹהִים
 וַיָּבִיאוּ אֹתוֹ בַּיִת דָּגוֹן
 וַיַּצִּיגוּ אֹתוֹ אֶצְל דָּגוֹן:

To the Philistines the Ark actually was the Israelite god. When the Ark was brought to the battlefield the Philistines cried: “God is come into the camp” (4, 7). In their view the Ark was identified with the Israelite god in the same way as the image of Dagon was identical with the god Dagon. The Bible ironically describes the Philistines’ behavior, chiding them for their childishness. But the prophetic message contained in the Dagon story is directed to all idolatrous peoples. The utter ridiculousness of the god Dagon lying in his own temple (5, 4) conveys an important lesson to all pagans.

What kind of idol was Dagon? Earlier commentators thought that it was a fish-god (fish = דג), and that it was imported to the Land of Israel by the Philistines when they invaded the country from the Mediterranean isles. This approach is not accepted anymore. We now know that Dagon was an indigenous god, worshipped as the god of the land and of agricultural produce. It is reasonable to follow Philo of Byblos (1st century CE) who connected its name to corn (= דגן). Dagon’s fame spread to many ancient peoples. He was worshipped in Ur of the Chaldees before the days of Abraham. There were Dagon temples in Mesopotamia; magicians

invoked his help in Mari, the great city on the river Euphrates; the inhabitants of Ugarit (in Northern Syria) set up monuments in his honor. The population that settled the “fertile crescent” stood in awe of Dagon who - they believed - taught their ancestors to till the soil. The priests and wise men were teaching that Dagon gave mankind the first plough.

The hollowness of Dagon’s claim as a fertility god is strikingly brought home to his worshippers. After his supposed victory over the Israelite god the Philistines are smitten with a disease of the intestines (5, 6; 5, 9; 5, 11-12; 6, 1-6) and the land is overrun by mice who destroy the crops (6, 5).

Underlying the Dagon story is the great prophetic debate with paganism and with the heathen notion of conquering and vanquished gods. The Bible teaches that the Philistine victory was due to the will of God, for the idols are nothing but “the work of men’s hands”. In the story of the Ark and Dagon we are taught that Israel’s failure, as well as its success, comes from the universal God who exists even within the temple of Dagon.

What we read in these chapters is obviously more than a folk-tale; it is a popular presentation of a great principle of Biblical teaching (Deuteronomy 4, 39):

Know this day and lay it to thy heart,
That the Lord, He is God in Heaven above
and upon the earth beneath; there is none else.

וַיִּדְעֶתָ הַיּוֹם וְהִשְׁבַּתָּ אֶל־לִבְךָ
כִּי הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל
וְעַל־הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת אֵין עוֹד: