

“Yahweh vs. Dagon”

1 Samuel 5:1-12

¹ When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ² Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon. ³ And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. ⁴ But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him. ⁵ This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the house of Dagon do not tread on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.

⁶ The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. ⁷ And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god.” ⁸ So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?” They answered, “Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath.” So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there. ⁹ But after they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city, causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them. ¹⁰ So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, “They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people.” ¹¹ They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, “Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people.” For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there. ¹² The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.

The Trojan Horse

The Greek siege of Troy had lasted for ten years. The Greeks devised a new ruse: a giant hollow wooden horse. It was built by Epeius and filled with Greek warriors led by Odysseus. The rest of the Greek army appeared to leave, but actually hid behind Tenedos. Meanwhile, a Greek spy, Sinon, convinced the Trojans that the horse was a gift despite the warnings of Laocoon and Cassandra; Helen and Deiphobus even investigated the horse; in the end, the Trojans accepted the gift. In ancient times it was customary for a defeated general to surrender his horse to the victorious general in a sign of respect.

The Trojans hugely celebrated the end of the siege, so that, when the Greeks emerged from the horse, the city was in a drunken stupor. The Greek warriors opened the city gates to allow the rest of the army to enter, and the city was pillaged ruthlessly, all the men were killed, and all the women and children were taken into slavery.¹

This military tactic is famous and legendary. However, it isn't new—or at least it wasn't. In some sense, the ark of the covenant as we read about it in chapters 4-6 is the original Trojan horse.

Remember what happened in chapter four. The Philistines defeat Israel in a small-scale battle and 4,000 Israelites are lost. Israel reacts to this, not by calling on God to deliver them, but by bringing the ark of the covenant to the battle lines. Why? The ark symbolized the presence of God. In fact, they recognized God as king and the ark was His footstool. On top of the ark were two cherubim (angels). They were considered to be his attendants. Wrongly, Israel thought that by bringing the ark to the battle-line either a) the very presence of the ark, somehow, magically, would give them military superiority; or b) by bringing the ark to the battle, they would somehow constrain God to fight for them. The irony is that all they had to do was ask.

Also remember the purpose of the book—to persuade Israel and us that Israel needed a king like David. This isn't to say that God would no longer be king, but that ultimately His authority and rule would be mediated through a

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trojan_horse

human king. This is important because of what we know the king's role is: to protect and defend his people from all their enemies.

We know the result of Israel's decision: the ark is captured, 30,000 men are killed, and Eli dies. Now from Israel's perspective, all is lost. They've lost the battle, their spiritual leadership, and even their God. From the Philistine's perspective all is won. They've not only won the battle, but now they control Israel's God. Or rather, because their god had defeated Israel's God that Israel's God will now serve them. This is where the story picks up.

Given that today's allotted sermon time is shorter because of our celebration of the Lord's Supper, instead of giving you formal "points," I'm just going to go through the text and explain things along the way.

Notice first...Verses 1-2

¹ When the Philistines captured the ark of God, they brought it from Ebenezer to Ashdod. ² Then the Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the house of Dagon and set it up beside Dagon.

In the excitement of victory, of their five major cities, Ashdod, Gath, Ashkelon, Ekron, and Gaza, they bring the ark back to Ashdod. Why Ashdod? Because there were three main gods in the Philistine pantheon: Dagon, Ashtoreth, and Baal-Zebul.

Of these three, the Philistines considered Dagon to be supreme and the head of the Pantheon. Added to this, Dagon's primary residence was his temple in Ashdod. Baal-zebul (or Baal-zebul), on the other hand, dwelt in Ekron. That will be important later given that his name means something like "lord of the flies." This is because it was thought that he had the power to prevent plagues. As for Ashtoreth, while we don't know exactly where she lived, I would be surprised if it wasn't Gath. Why? Because, as we see Yahweh mount His attack on the Philistines, He takes out each of their gods in short order.

The fact of Dagon's supremacy is, no doubt, why the ark of God was taken to Ashdod. Apparently, Dagon was given credit for their victory over the Hebrew God and now that God would be brought to serve him. They brought the ark into the temple of Dagon and set it up beside him. This gesture either symbolized the fact that Yahweh was now one of Dagon's attendants or the fact that he was being absorbed into their pantheon, under Dagon's leadership.

While this was common, it wasn't necessarily done with a great amount of confidence. They'd heard the stories of what this god had done in Egypt and, I think, were a bit worried. How do we know this? At the beginning of v. 3, the text says, "they rose early." In other words, they were a bit anxious. They had reason to be. Look at verse 3:

³ And when the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD. So they took Dagon and put him back in his place.

What's going on here? Either there's been an accident (maybe a clumsy priest) or something bigger. You see, the day before they'd put the ark of God in Dagon's temple as a sign of victory and now Israel's God would be Dagon's servant. When they awoke they found a surprising reversal. Instead of finding things the way they left them, they found their god, Dagon, lying prostrate before the ark of God. This posture meant either submission or worship or both. Either way, Dagon had taken the subservient position. Hoping for the best, they go with the former option—there must have been an accident or a mistake. They put Dagon back in his place. What happens next? Look at verse 4:

⁴ But when they rose early on the next morning, behold, Dagon had fallen face downward on the ground before the ark of the LORD, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off on the threshold. Only the trunk of Dagon was left to him.

When they rise the next day, they go to the temple to find an even more shocking scenario than the day before. Not only is Dagon lying face down before the ark, but his head and his hands “were lying cut off on the threshold.” Why is this significant? Because it shows not only Dagon’s submission before Yahweh, but his utter humiliation and defeat. In the ancient Near East, conquering kings would do this to the leaders of conquered peoples in order to remove any doubt about who was victorious. Not only this, but it also served to frighten and intimidate them into thinking twice about bucking their new ruler.

Here, both for the Philistines and the Israelite readers, God is showing Himself to be the conquering king. And just in case there were any questions, notice where Dagon’s hands were lying—on the threshold. Again, in the ancient Near East, those who fled their enemies might receive sanctuary if they could just reach a holy place and lay their hands upon the threshold. It’s sort of like when kids have a safe-zone while playing tag. However, while Dagon might have sought “sanctuary,” the message is clear, “there can be only one.”

Here is an instance in which we see God be utterly merciless, not toward people, but toward anything that would keep people from relating to Him as they ought. Calvin said, “The human heart is an idol-factory.” Don’t be surprised to find the idols of your heart face down with their head and hands cut off. Why? Because God knows that He is the only one Who can satisfy us and He is, most often, unwilling to let us live under the false impression that they can help, comfort, or even save us.

God kills Dagon, but why does he afflict the people? Because Dagon wasn’t the only god to be conquered. You see, Dagon was the head of their pantheon of three, and while Dagon was thought to be responsible for their offense (their victories), the others were thought to be responsible for their defense (namely guarding them from plagues). As mentioned before, the name Baal-Zebul, whose primary dwelling place was Ekron, means something like “lord of the flies.” They believed that he protected them from various plagues.

Now that God has dealt a humiliating blow to the Philistines’ offensive god, He’ll strike at their defensive god. Unfortunately, the only way for the Philistines to really see that their defensive god is no match for Yahweh is to experience that from which he was supposed to defend them—plague. In this case, it seems very much like bubonic plague (which also makes sense given the appearance of rats in this story). Between the two, I think one could make the case that He’s also striking even their fertility goddess, Ashtoreth. In the midst of all this, the image we get is that of Israel’s exodus from Egypt.

Notice verses 6-9:

⁶ The hand of the LORD was heavy against the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and afflicted them with tumors, both Ashdod and its territory. ⁷ And when the men of Ashdod saw how things were, they said, “The ark of the God of Israel must not remain with us, for his hand is hard against us and against Dagon our god.” ⁸ So they sent and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, “What shall we do with the ark of the God of Israel?” They answered, “Let the ark of the God of Israel be brought around to Gath.” So they brought the ark of the God of Israel there. ⁹ But after they had brought it around, the hand of the LORD was against the city, causing a very great panic, and he afflicted the men of the city, both young and old, so that tumors broke out on them.

The men of Ashdod, afflicted with tumors, realize that their god, Dagon, is no match for Yahweh so they call a meeting of the Philistine lords and said, basically, “What shall we do?” You get the sense that the leaders of Gath are either skeptical of Ashdod’s story or they believe that their god, probably Ashtoreth, will fare better. She doesn’t. Not only is there great panic, but we see that, here, the author makes a point of telling us that, in Gath, the Lord struck the men—both old and young—with tumors.

At this point, the story is almost comical in that the Gathites throw polity out the window and don’t ask anybody if they can send the ark to Ekron. They just do it. Part of their rationale, beside alleviating their own suffering, was the fact that in Ekron dwelt Baal-zebul—the lord of the flies. Certainly he would be impervious to this onslaught from the Lord.

What's interesting, however, is the fact that those who worship Baal-zebul are in no hurry to find out if he can help. In other words, they have no faith that he can deliver them.

Consider verses 10-11:

¹⁰ *So they sent the ark of God to Ekron. But as soon as the ark of God came to Ekron, the people of Ekron cried out, "They have brought around to us the ark of the God of Israel to kill us and our people."* ¹¹ *They sent therefore and gathered together all the lords of the Philistines and said, "Send away the ark of the God of Israel, and let it return to its own place, that it may not kill us and our people." For there was a deathly panic throughout the whole city. The hand of God was very heavy there.*

Notice that before there is any affliction, they cry foul. They call a meeting, again, of the lords and say, let's send the ark back to its own place. The language here is interesting because the word they use for "send away" is the word "exodus." In other words, they say, let's exodus this thing. We know they were familiar with the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and, perhaps, they are starting to realize that the same god that delivered them with great power from Egypt is the very one afflicting them now.

In fact, I'm sure they understood this. Remember how this story began. They believed they had conquered Israel and her God and so place Him in Dagon's temple as an attendant. Notice how the story ends:

¹² *The men who did not die were struck with tumors, and the cry of the city went up to heaven.*

For one thing, it's important to notice that being spared death did not equal deliverance. Secondly, notice the direction of their cries—heaven. In other words, they have abandoned their gods, at least temporarily, and have begun to cry out to the only One who can deliver them.

What does this have to do with us, modern Christians? Everything. You see, in this passage Yahweh gives Israel and us a picture of what He, as their divine king, calls their human king to do as well. Remember the "job" of a king? According to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, the one who occupies the kingly office does so by "subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies."² God had subdued the Philistines, He defended Israel (whether they knew it or not), and He conquered His and their enemies.

This is exactly what God's ultimate, human king would do for us, and He did it in much the same fashion—by way of a clever ruse. While we, like Israel, walked in defeat and hopelessness, Jesus showed up as the son of a poor family—a threat to no one. He lived the life we should have lived and ultimately was crucified. Imagine the rejoicing among the powers of evil. Little did they know, however, that by crucifying Jesus they were playing right into His hands. You see, in the defeat of Jesus was also the defeat of our greatest enemy—sin. Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead, not as *christus fundo* (Christ the Defeated), but as *christus victor* (Christ the Victor). Why is this important? Simply because in my experience, most Christians walk around defeated and depressed. They worry about everything—money, politics, etc. However, what we know from today's text and from the person and work of Jesus is that no matter what happens around us, Christ is victorious and Christ will be victorious. Remember, out of the greatest, apparent defeat, God wrought his greatest, real victory.

² Westminster Shorter Catechism, #26.