

Priest of Dagon

I am a priest of the great god Dagon of the Philistines. Our people came to the land of Canaan from the islands of the sea. Our god made us lords over the Israelites by giving us the knowledge of iron-working and preventing Israel from acquiring iron swords and chariots. Dagon defeated their god. He even gave us the victory over that mighty warrior of Israel, Samson.

We eventually took the Israelites' god captive. It was the box carried when they crossed the Jordan and in their victory over Jericho. When we taunted them about it, they claimed it was not their god but called it the "ark of the covenant." All we knew is that we were able to capture it and place it in the Temple of Dagon in Ashdod.

I was on duty the next morning and found Dagon fallen before the ark of the covenant. I had not felt an earthquake, but they do happen. The image of Dagon was lying face down on the floor pointed towards the ark. We quickly put it back upright, checked for damage and stabilized the base. Fortunately, the public had not seen it. The next day, early morning, the image was again fallen before the ark and both the head and arms were broken off, lying across the threshold of the door. We could not repair it. We were careful to step over the debris.

Then reports started to come in of unusual illnesses and deaths. Many people were finding themselves afflicted with tumors. The rumor of what happened in the temple was spreading. People demanded that something be done immediately. We called the rulers and they agreed that the ark must go. But relocating it from Ashdod to Ekron didn't solve the problem. The people of Ekron said, "They have brought the ark of the god of Israel round to us to kill us and our people." Finally, all five of our rulers agreed to send the ark back to Israel. Maybe Israel had actually plotted this thing to destroy us through sorcery! But it had to be handled delicately because it is a humiliation to admit that we could not counter it.

People were dying and those who did not die had tumors and there were rats everywhere. Still it took several months for the political-religious system to operate. The diviners concluded that it must be sent back with a gift, 5 gold tumors and 5 gold rats. The ark was placed on a cart, next to a chest with the gold objects, pulled by two recently calved cows, to Beth Shemesh. The 5 kings went along and saw how the Israelite priests carried down the ark and slaughtered and sacrificed the cows, using the wood of the cart for the fire.

But we heard later that 70 men of Beth Shemesh were struck down because they had looked into the ark. So, it is an instrument of death even towards themselves! Give me the more predictable gods, like Dagon, even though he could not stand before the ark of Israel.

1 Samuel 5 & 6, Joshua 17:18, Zephaniah 1:9, Trude Dothan, *The Philistines and Their Material Culture* (Yale University Press, 1982)