

# JESUS THE FISH GOD?

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In our day we have seen a revival of another ancient symbol of the Church, the fish. I remember first reading about it years ago and was quite impressed. Some early Gentile Christians who were persecuted had a secret sign among them. They would make a semi arc with their foot in the dirt, and if the other person opposite them did the same thing, they would know that they were Christians. The two arcs, intersecting at the front and the back, would form a sort of simple fish design.

In Greek, the word for fish is ιχθυς (*ich-thys*). Each letter would be taken and used as an acronym to stand for; Jesus Christ Son of God Savior.<sup>1</sup> I thought that was pretty neat. *Unger's Bible Dictionary* states that,

‘in Christian symbolism, the fish is of great significance. It is among the earliest art forms’; ‘generally thought to be the symbol for Christ.’<sup>2</sup>

Unger comments that water baptism was in the mind of those who made the fish to be a symbol for Christ.<sup>3</sup>

One day though, I had some thoughts that puzzled me:

‘Where is the biblical connection between Jesus and something that would associate Him as a fish? And how does water baptism make Jesus into a fish?’

I realized that Yeshua (the Hebrew Name for Jesus) had fed many Jewish people with just a few fish and some bread.<sup>4</sup> He was called the Bread of Life (Jn. 6:35, 48) and He also said to Peter and Andrew that if they followed Him, He would make them fishers of men (Mt. 4:18-19), but could this be a reason why He would be called or equated with a fish?<sup>5</sup> It seemed a little strange to me. I know, too, that there are many fish motifs in places where baptism is practiced, but how does that relate to Yeshua? There is nothing in the Word of God that lends itself to Him being pictured as a fish. A lamb, yes (John 1:29; 36; Rev. 5:6, 8,

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 25th printing, 1976), p. 369. ‘I, Ιησους, Jesus; X, Χριστος, Christ; Θ, Θεου, of God; Y, Υιος, Son; Σ, Σωτηρ, Savior.’ (It can be written with all capitals letters; ΙΧΘΥΣ, or just the first letter as a capital; Ιχθυς. The word in Greek can be seen on the bumpers of many cars that belong to Christians.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 14:17f., 15:34f., Mark 6:38ff; 8:7f., Luke 9:16, John 6:9.

<sup>5</sup> Some might suggest that Yeshua, who miraculously multiplied fish and bread for them, was called the Bread of Life (see John 6:35, 48 where Yeshua refers to Himself as such). And so why not call Him the Fish of Life, too? Nowhere, though, does He refer to Himself as the Fish of Life or anything like that. In the *Tanach* (the Hebrew Bible, aka the Old Testament) there is ample foundation for Yeshua to call Himself the Bread of Life. The Manna in the Wilderness which sustained Israel was part of the national history. When Yeshua comes on the scene, He is not making anything up by calling Himself the Bread of Life but referring to something that everyone understood as part of their Jewish history. He uses this picture of Manna in the Wilderness, to relate to Himself in the same section of John (6:31-51), as the True Bread that comes down from Heaven (6:41), a reference to the Real Manna coming from God.

etc.), a lion, yes (Rev. 5:5), but not a fish. As for Yeshua saying that He would make us ‘fishers of men,’ He didn’t say that He would make men into fish. He meant that as fishers fish for fish, so we would ‘fish for men.’ Be that as it may, the illustration has to do with what Yeshua would do with us. It says nothing about Him being seen as a fish.

Then one day I realized that in the Bible there was a god that was represented as a fish, actually, half fish and half man. It was the god of the Philistines, the enemies of Israel. His name was Dagon<sup>6</sup> which means ‘fish’ in Hebrew.<sup>7</sup> James Freeman in *Manners and Customs of the Bible* writes:

‘Dagon is the diminutive of dag, and signifies ‘little fish;’ not so much, however, in reference to size, as to the affection entertained for it; so that some would render it, ‘dear little fish.’ The Babylonians believed that a being, part man and part fish, emerged from the Erythraean Sea, and appeared in Babylonia in the early days of its history, and taught the people various arts necessary for their well-being. Representations of this fish-god have been found among the sculptures of Nineveh. The Philistine Dagon was of a similar character.’<sup>8</sup>

Babylon and Nineveh. They certainly pre-date the birth of Yeshua. Would Yeshua have us to use symbols and titles that belong to pagan gods?

Dagon means the ‘Fish-god.’<sup>9</sup> When the Ark of the Covenant was captured by the Philistines, at first they placed it in their temple to Dagon as symbolic of the booty captured and their victory over Israel and her God. But the next day they found Dagon fallen on his face. They propped him up but he had trouble staying up. The following day they found him again face down but this time with his hands and head cut off (1st Sam. 5:1-4). It seems that Dagon didn’t do too well with his rival, Yahveh, the God of Israel, that accompanied the Ark. This happened in Ashdod, one of the five major cities of the Philistines along the Mediterranean coast of present day Israel.<sup>10</sup>

That Dagon was not confined to just one location is also seen from the fact that in Ugarit, a great city that flourished before Moses took Israel out of Egypt, two temples, ‘dedicated to the god Baal and his father Dagon’<sup>11</sup> have been found. The people that inhabited Ugarit were Canaanites. Ugarit was situated in what is presently Ras Shamra, Syria, about half a mile (0.8 kilometers), from the Mediterranean Sea, parallel with Cyprus.

Ugarit was a cosmopolitan city that did trade with much of the nations around it. It’s been shown that they knew, ‘seven different languages’.<sup>12</sup> That speaks much for their ability to trade with other peoples.

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<sup>6</sup> Judges 16:23; 1st Samuel 5:2-7; 1st Chronicles 10:10.

<sup>7</sup> Actually, the word for fish is דָּג (*dag*, or the first three letters of Dagon). Adding the diminutive ‘on’ to the Hebrew word for fish gives us the name of the Philistine god, דָּגוֹן Dagon (pronounced *dah-gon*). The adding of the diminutive changes the meaning from ‘fish’ to ‘dear little fish’ or ‘beloved fish.’

<sup>8</sup> Rev. James M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Plainfield, New Jersey: Logos International, 1972; originally written about 1874), p. 126, #236.

<sup>9</sup> Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, 2nd American edition. (Neptune, New Jersey: Loizeaux Brothers, 1959; originally written in 1862), p. 114. No less of a pillar of the Christian Church than Jerome calls Dagon ‘the well known Fish-god.’ His book can be read for free at <http://seedofabraham.net/The-Two-Babylons.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> We also read in Judges 16:21-31 that Dagon was worshipped in the Philistine city of Gaza.

<sup>11</sup> J. I. Packer and M. C. Tenney, Editors, *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1980), p. 140.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

One of their main products for export was cosmetics. Fennel grew in the region. It's 'a fragrant flower whose seeds are used for making aromatic ointments.'<sup>13</sup> They were also known for their purple dye.<sup>14</sup> Their history covers about 800 years with 1550-1200 being their 'golden age'.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, as knowledgeable and sophisticated as they were, they were also deeply involved in their fertility cult. Bestiality was practiced among their gods<sup>16</sup> and most likely in the temples by the people. James Packer in *Illustrated Manners and Customs of the Bible* tells us that,

'Fertility religions such as Ugarit's place great emphasis on the reproduction of the land, in crops and in the womb. This emphasis helps explain their stress on sexual unions.' 'At Ugarit' 'homosexual priests and priestesses...acted as prostitutes.'<sup>17</sup>

Dagon was not just the god of the Philistines. If Ugarit was any indication of how Dagon was worshipped, we can see that the people were totally debased. Why would someone who loves Yeshua want to take a pagan symbol and suggest that it represents Yeshua? I can think of no good biblical reason. If you see someone wearing a police uniform, you naturally tend to think they're a cop. If they are not, they are an impostor. If we take upon ourselves a symbol of paganism, which essentially comes from Satan, how can this serve our desire to reflect Yeshua?

Both the Philistine and Ugarit locations, next to the sea, lend themselves to the worship of a fish god. The fish was worshipped for its ability to procreate rapidly. Abundance was a sign of blessing.

Dagon was represented as either half fish and half man, where the upper part of his body would be fully human<sup>18</sup> or, 'the head of the fish formed a mitre above that of the man, while its scaly, fan-like tail fell as a cloak behind, leaving the human limbs and feet exposed.'<sup>19</sup> The priests of Dagon wore a mitre on their head that resembled the head and jaws of a fish.<sup>20</sup> Is it a coincidence that the Pope wears an identical mitre?<sup>21</sup>

There is some question as to if the Dagon of the Philistines was actually a fish god or a god of grain. This is because the Hebrew word can also mean grain. Benjamin Davidson in *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* tells us that the word is used for both:

'dagon means a '(large fish),' properly the 'name of an idol of the Philistines worshipped at Ashdod.' He also says that *dah-gahn* means 'grain.'<sup>22</sup>

Some have found that Dagon in some places was actually a grain god.<sup>23</sup> Whether this is the case for the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 140-141.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 144.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>18</sup> Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 215.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. This quote was originally taken from Layard's *Babylon and Nineveh*, p. 343.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 215f.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Davidson, *The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, Editors; John Willis, Translator, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 140.

Philistine Dagon we cannot fully determine. But there is no question about the Greek word for fish (Ichthys). It was the title for many gods in the ancient world and therefore, a symbol of a fish would serve them. Also we know that fish gods were in a number of places such as Babylon and Nineveh as Freeman told us above. Johannes Botterweck writes,

‘The role the fish plays in the cult is most varied. Apparently there have been fish cults among’ ‘people from time immemorial.’<sup>24</sup> ‘In the provincial capital of Latopolis’ (Egypt) ‘the Nile perch (latos) had its own cult. It was connected with Neith, who at the creation of the world momentarily assumed the form of a latos in the primeval waters’.<sup>25</sup>

Alexander Hislop tells us more about latos (the Egyptian fish god) and shows us that many gods whom we might not have associated with being a ‘fish-god’ were indeed known by that title:

‘The name ‘lat,’ or the hidden one, had evidently been given, as well as Saturn, to the great Babylonian god. This is evident from the name of the fish Latus, which was worshipped along with the Egyptian Minerva, in the city of Latopolis in Egypt, now Esneh (WILKINSON), that fish Latus evidently just being another name for the fish-god Dagon. We have seen that Ichthys, or the Fish, was one of the names of Bacchus; and the Assyrian goddess Atergatis, with her son Ichthys is said to have been cast into the lake of Ascalon.’ ‘That the sun-god Apollo had been known under the name of Lat, may be inferred from the Greek name of his mother-wife Leto, or in Doric, Lato, which is just the feminine of Lat’<sup>26</sup>

Apollo, Bacchus and Saturn were known as fish gods? That was news to me. This thing seemed to be more widespread then I had first imagined. I hadn’t known that pagan gods were symbolized as fish.

Ringgren writes that if Dagon was the fish god of the Philistines, it would make him ‘comparable with the goddess Derketo and the Babylonian fish-man Oannes.’<sup>27</sup> Here we come to the original or the prototype with Oannes. Babylon was the place where paganism and rebellion to Yahveh fermented and Oannes is the first of all the fish gods. It seems that this fish god taught Man many things and that it was the water or sea that originally transformed him from just a man to the fish god. In other words, the man was transformed into another being by the waters.

In Babylon, the fish god came out of the ‘Red Sea or Persian Gulf, half man and half fish’ and ‘civilized the Babylonians, taught them arts and sciences, and instructed them in politics and religion.’<sup>28</sup> His name was Oannes whom Hislop presents as another name for Dagon,<sup>29</sup> Bacchus, Tammuz and Nimrod.<sup>30</sup> From The Two Babylons we read that the great rebel Nimrod is the archtype for the fish god:

‘BEROSUS, BUNSEN’S Egypt, vol. 1, p. 707. To identify Nimrod with Oannes, mentioned by Berosus as appearing out of the sea, it will be remembered that Nimrod has been proved to be Bacchus. Then, for proof that Nimrod or Bacchus, on being overcome

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 133.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 270, footnote.

<sup>27</sup> Botterweck, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, p. 141.

<sup>28</sup> Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 243.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 114. Another well known name that was seen as an expression of Dagon or Oannes was Bacchus. He is called the fish god also. Hislop states that Oannes was originally Tammuz or Nimrod.

by his enemies, was fabled to have taken refuge in the sea, see chapter 4, section i. When, therefore, he was represented as reappearing, it was natural that he should reappear in the very character of Oannes, as a Fish-god. Now, Jerome calls Dagon, the well known Fish-god *Piscem moeroris* (BRYANT), ‘the fish of sorrow,’ which goes far to identify that Fish-god with Bacchus, the ‘Lamented one’; and the identification is complete when Hesychius tells us that some called Bacchus, *Ichthys*, or ‘The Fish.’<sup>31</sup>

Using the symbol of a fish to represent Jesus doesn’t appear to be a good idea. It seems that the whole pagan world used the term to represent their fish god. Even with the Greek letters inside it ‘to identify it’ as Yeshua, we find ourselves enshrouding Him in a pagan symbol. Why would we want to use something that represents a pagan god, to portray Yeshua?

Just as we know that the Earth was once flooded in the days of Noah, so too did the pagan peoples understand this.<sup>32</sup> There are similar legends among the Mexicans, the Druids, the Greeks, in India, Egypt and Africa, etc.<sup>33</sup> In India, the ‘lost *Vedas*’ or sacred books were recovered by a ‘great god, under the form of a fish.’<sup>34</sup> Could this be where the association of water baptism and Yeshua as a fish came from? Did you notice that Bacchus took refuge in the sea and when he came out, he was ‘another man’, Oannes? This is where baptismal regeneration comes from. The waters transformed him. It’s called magic.

Baptismal regeneration sounds biblical but is a pagan doctrine. It’s a deception. It states that one can be sprinkled or immersed in water and that this atones for sins, or purifies the person, and that the person is saved. This is found in the Catholic Church and some other churches. They call it ‘holy water.’

This is a far cry from the waters of biblical baptism which pictures the person asking for forgiveness of their sins in the Name of Yeshua. The immersion pictures the death of the person and the subsequent coming up from the water symbolizes new life in Messiah. It’s not the water that purifies the soul or the water that saves, but the Blood of Yeshua and His Spirit on a heart that submits to Him and His Ways.

The pagans used the story of Noah emerging from the Flood but gave it their own little twist. Dagon or Oannes was said to originally have been Noah.<sup>35</sup> Noah was said to be transformed or reincarnated as he passed through the flood waters. He was symbolized as a fish god,<sup>36</sup> to lead Man in the ‘right way.’ And you thought the fish symbol was just some innocent design?

By identifying Nimrod with Noah, it would be seen that Noah had been reincarnated,

‘as Dagon, that he might bring mankind back again to the blessings they had lost when Nimrod was slain.’<sup>37</sup>

Ancient history tells us that Nimrod set up worship of fire in place of the One True God.<sup>38</sup> It was he who, following in the wicked footsteps of his father, Cush (Gen. 10:8), turned men away from the worship of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., footnote.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 242-243.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 214-215.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>38</sup> Remember the burning bush? Satan was not going to allow God to corner the market on fire. Someone might ask, ‘Well, does that mean we can’t use fire?’ Only if you worship it.

Yahveh. Men began to worship fire, and be ‘purified’ by it. The ultimate form of this worship was infant sacrifice. After that, and alongside it, water would become a purifier, hence the Flood as the purifier of Bacchus. With this began the teaching of baptismal regeneration, as Noah passed through the waters of the Flood.<sup>39</sup> Using something that was true (Noah and the Flood), Satan perverted it for his own use (Oannes, the Fish god, etc.).

Revelation 12:15 pictures a Woman being overwhelmed by a flood of water from the Serpent. The Woman represents believers in Messiah Yeshua:

‘And the Serpent cast out of his mouth a flood of water after the Woman that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood.’

This Serpent is also known as the Dragon or the Devil (Rev. 12:9; 20:2). Hislop unfolds the mystery of the Woman, the Dragon and the flood of waters for us when he writes:

‘The symbol here is certainly very remarkable. If this was the dragon of fire, it might have been expected that it would have been represented, according to popular myth, as vomiting fire after the woman. But it is not so. It was a flood of water that he cast out of his mouth. What could this be? As the water came out of the mouth of the dragon, that must mean doctrine, and of course, false doctrine. But is there nothing more specific than this? A single glance at the old Babylonian type will show that the water cast out of the mouth of the serpent must be the water of baptismal regeneration. Now, it was precisely at this time, when the old Paganism was suppressed, that the doctrine of regenerating men by baptism, which had been working in the Christian Church before, threatened to spread like a deluge over the face of the Roman empire. It was then precisely that our Lord Jesus Christ began to be popularly called Ichthys that is, ‘the Fish,’<sup>40</sup> manifestly to identify him with Dagon. At the end of the fourth century, and from that time forward it was taught, that he who had been washed in the baptismal font was thereby born again, and made pure as the virgin snow.’<sup>41</sup>

It seems like *Unger’s* was right when it stated earlier that water baptism was in the mind of those who made the fish to be a symbol for Christ. Unfortunately, pagan water baptism or baptismal regeneration has no basis in the Word of God. It’s magic. Also, the flood of water is not limited to just baptismal regeneration, although the symbolism is very apt. Within the Roman Catholic Church there are many false and pagan ceremonies, theologies and practices that originated in Babylon and not the Word of God. The Catholic Church was flooded with these pagan ways and symbols.<sup>42</sup> Hislop states that it was,

‘From about AD 360, to the time of the Emperor Justinian, about 550, we have evidence both of the promulgation of this doctrine, and also of the deep hold it came at last to take of professing Christians.’<sup>43</sup>

He also goes on to say that it was the design of the Roman Catholic Church to bring paganism into Christianity. A goal that they excelled in. Can we take the rites and symbols of Bacchus and Apollo and make

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<sup>39</sup> Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 244.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. Hislop cites ‘Augustine, *De Civitate*, lib. xviii. cap. 23, vol. ix. p. 665.’

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> For a complete understanding of this, please read Hislop’s, *The Two Babylons*. The extent of paganism in the Catholic Church is overwhelming. And some of it has flowed into the Protestant churches.

<sup>43</sup> Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, p. 247.

them Christian? The first question that comes to mind is, ‘Why would we even want to?’ The second is, ‘If it’s not in the Bible, how could we ‘attach’ it to Yeshua without usurping God’s authority to direct our lives?’ If I place upon Yeshua something that is not biblically ordained, but comes from paganism, I am drawing Yeshua into the pagan realm, not elevating or transforming a pagan symbol into a Christian one. The Bible is our authority for what we believe, and therefore, what we should practice. Resting our belief on anything else places us on dangerous ground.

There isn’t any biblical justification to label Yeshua as ‘the Fish’ or to use a fish symbol for Him. Now, there are times when Satan the thief just steals titles, symbols or concepts from the Lord Yeshua, as in Tammuz being called the Savior of the world, ‘who died for the good of mankind.’<sup>44</sup> At this point it is a matter of who is the Real Savior. But Yeshua being represented by a ‘fish’ has no biblical basis in either the Old or the New Testaments.

So, what of the fish symbol that is re-immersing among Christians today? From what we’ve seen, paganism had an exclusive market on it. No where do we see Yeshua being portrayed as a fish. But our God does give us a warning about using the fish symbol:

The ‘prohibition of graven images in Dt. 4:9-28 is defined more specifically by detailed prohibitions against making ‘the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth’ (v. 18), etc. This excludes fish emblems or representations of fish gods according to the heathen custom.’<sup>45</sup>

It would seem that Yeshua wouldn’t appreciate being represented by a fish. After all, are we to mold Him over into our image or are we to find out Who He is?

‘Yeshua the Messiah is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings’ (Heb. 13:8-9a).

Let us not be carried away by all the hoopla that attends the fish symbol. Many people are ignorant of its origin and true meaning. But obviously, it is a ‘strange teaching’ that should have no place in the life of a follower of Yeshua. This is true for the fish symbol as it stands alone, or with the Greek letters in it, supposedly representing Yeshua.

It is also true of the so-called ‘Messianic Seal’, which has the fish symbol, the so-called Star of David, the Seven Branched Menorah (Lampstand, Ex. 25:31-35), and sometimes the (pagan) cross on it.<sup>46</sup> This Seal is gaining momentum among many believers. There’s nothing Messianic about it except for the Menorah, but the placing of a biblical symbol in the midst of two or three pagan symbols does not give it validity to be used as a symbol for Yeshua or His Bride.

‘When Yahveh your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’ You must not behave thus toward Yahveh your God, for every abominable act which Yahveh hates they have done for their gods. For they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 246.

<sup>45</sup> Botterweck, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, p. 137.

<sup>46</sup> For more information on the so-called Star of David being pagan, see <http://seedofabraham.net/The-Star-of-David.pdf>, and for the Christian cross, see <http://seedofabraham.net/The-Christian-Cross.pdf>.

You must not add to nor take away from it' (Deut. 12:29-32).

It is to our shame that Satan can so easily deceive so many of us, especially when it's written in His Word not to give to Him what the pagans give to their own gods.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Revised on 29 March 2016.