

"TERAPHIM"

All through the ages interpreters of the Book of Genesis have puzzled over a feature of the account of Jacob's departure from his uncle, Laban. Why were the household gods, or teraphim, which Rachel stole, considered to be of such tremendous importance? When Laban returned and found that Jacob already had a three days' start, he became tremendously excited. This was not because Jacob had left, nor because he had taken away Laban's daughters and grandchildren without giving him a chance to say good-bye to them, nor because he had taken away such great possessions of flocks and herds -- all of which, of course, Jacob had earned from him -- and yet which Laban was very loathe indeed to lose. That which so disturbed Laban was the loss of these teraphim.

As a result we find Laban pursuing with a sufficient force to strike terror to the heart of Jacob, in spite of the fact that Jacob had a large number of herdsmen under him. When Laban overtook Jacob after a number of days -- we are told the encounter took place down in Palestine while Laban lived way up in northern Syria -- Laban accused Jacob of having taken the teraphim. Jacob indignantly denied the charge. We find him becoming quite heated over Laban's mean and wrong attitude toward him, that after all of Laban's meanness, he should now accuse him of sinking so low as to steal the household gods. Jacob said, "You may kill anyone in whose possession these household gods are found. Search everything I have!" Laban searched very thoroughly, but did not find the teraphim because Rachel sat on them. This is proof, then, that the teraphim cannot have been very large. Certain medieval commentators have thought that the reason for Laban's great interest