

tounded at being accused of such a terrible thing. Vehemently denying that he had stolen anything that was Laban's, he invited his father-in-law to search all his property, declaring that he would kill anyone in whose possession these household gods might be found. After all the rest of the camp had been searched, Laban came to the tent of Rachel. Rachel sat on the teraphim, and her father did not suspect that they were underneath her. Under these circumstances it would hardly seem that the amount of gold which they could have contained would have paid more than a fraction of the cost of the expedition which Laban undertook in the hope of recovering them. Why then were they so important?

The whole story is rather incomprehensible without further information as to why Laban was so anxious to recover these teraphim. The fact that their importance is not explained is hardly compatible with the idea that the story might be the product of a much later period, when the custom no longer existed. In such a case the reason would certainly have been stated.

A novelist writing fifty years ago would hardly have stopped to point out the importance of parts of a harness or of a buggy, which would have been thoroughly familiar to any reader of his day. One writing such a novel today would be sure to explain these matters, since few people today are familiar with them. It is quite clear, therefore, that the original readers of Genesis 31 must have understood fully why the teraphim were so important, or the writer would have explained the matter. Probably, however, by the time of the Israelite kingdom the explanation had been completely forgotten, and it remained a mystery until recently.

Beginning in 1925 discoveries were made at the ancient town of Nuzi in northeastern Mesopotamia. Here were

found a great many legal contracts from a period a little later than the time of Jacob. These threw much light upon the life of the people there. A legal document from the area gave evidence that among the ethnic group which was dominant at Harran, the region where Laban lived, possession of the household gods gave a son-in-law the right to appear in court and claim the estate of his deceased father-in-law.²¹ Now it becomes perfectly clear to us why Laban was so tremendously aroused about the loss of these household gods! Jacob had already taken a great part of his possessions. He feared that after his death Jacob would take all the rest from his sons. It would seem very likely that this was Rachel's actual purpose in taking the household gods. It makes clear and understandable why Jacob and Laban put up a pile of stones and said over it the Mizpah declaration: "The Lord watch between me and thee, when we are absent one from another" (Gen. 31:49). They called upon God to watch that neither of them should cross over this boundary line in order to injure the other; that Laban should not come in order to bring physical injury to Jacob, and that Jacob should not go back with the household gods after Laban's death in order to defraud his brothers-in-law of the property which should belong to them.

We are glad to note that Jacob made no effort to use the household gods in this way. At Shechem he called on everyone in his party to take all the foreign gods which he might have and to bury them (Gen. 35:2-4).

Thus light from archaeology makes clear what was previously a rather obscure passage, and in addition, casts grave doubt on the theory of some critical scholars, that this passage originated many centuries after the events described.

²¹Sidney Smith and C. J. Gadd, *Revue Assyriologie*, Vol. 23, (1928), pp. 126, 127, and E. A. Speiser, *Mesopotamian Origins*, (Philadelphia: 1930), p. 162.