

All through the ages interpreters of the Book of Genesis have puzzled over the great importance attached by Laban and Rachel to the household gods which she stole. Why should Laban have been so excited about the loss of these "teraphim" that he would think it worth while to gather an expedition and pursue Jacob many days in order to attempt to get them back? His expedition had to be very large, for Jacob had a great number of herdsmen with him and could have protected himself from an ordinary attack. Some medieval commentators have suggested that the reason for their great importance was that they were made of gold. This explanation is not satisfactory, since we learn that when Jacob allowed Laban to search his entire establishment he did not find them because Rachel was hiding them underneath her as she sat in her tent (Gen. 31:34,35). The amount of gold that could thus be hidden would not be sufficient to pay the cost of the expedition which Laban had to conduct. Until recent years the problem remained an insoluble mystery.

Destructive critics maintain that this portion was not written by Moses, but by someone who lived many centuries after the time of Jacob. If this were the case, we would expect to find an explanation of the importance attributed to the teraphim, since at that later time the reason for their importance would be as little known to the reader as it is to people today.

Very recently the solution to this mystery has come to light. A great many clay tablets have been excavated at the town of Nuzi in northern Mesopotamia in the region in which Laban lived and from approximately the same period. From them we learn that at that time the possession of a man's household gods by a son-in-law was acceptable in court in that region as evidence that he had designated that son-in-law as heir to all his possessions. This explains why Rachel was so anxious to keep the teraphim, and why Laban was so determined, if possible, to get them back, and prevent Jacob from securing what was left of his property after his death.