

Genesis 31:31–35; 35:1–5 — The Teraphim in Rachel’s Tent

Household Idols, Self-Will as Idolatry, Rachel’s Lie, and Jacob’s Exercise Before Bethel

Scripture Reading: Genesis 31:31–35; 35:1–5; 1 Samuel 15:23; 1 John 5:21

“With whomsoever thou findest thy gods, let him not live... For Jacob knew not that Rachel had stolen them.” (Genesis 31:32)

“Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments: and let us arise, and go up to Bethel.” (Genesis 35:2–3)

The Teraphim: What They Were and Where They Came From

The images that Rachel stole from her father Laban are called teraphim — a plural term for household or domestic idols. They were not for public worship but for private use, kept in the home. They appear at several points in the Old Testament: Micah in Judges 17 had teraphim made from his mother’s money, one graven and one molten. Michal placed one in David’s bed to deceive those sent to arrest him. Hosea 3:4 says that Israel would be a long time without king, without prince, without sacrifice, and without teraphim — the teraphim being listed among the marks of her religious life, however corrupted.

A molten image is a casting — made from a mold, reproducible, multiple copies available. A graven image allows more room for the individual artistic imagination, shaped and cut by hand. Both kinds were available in Laban’s

house. Rachel had learned to love these things in her father's household — that is where she acquired the taste for them. That is a sad fact. The idolatry of the parental home shapes the affections of the children in it, and the shaping is not easily undone.

Self-Will Is as Iniquity and Idolatry: The Root

First Samuel 15:23 gives the divine diagnosis: rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Self-will and idolatry are not separate sins; they are the same sin in different expressions. The idol in the house of wood or metal or plaster is the outward form of the inner idol of the self-will that has displaced the will of God. The fountain of all idolatry is right there in the garden — when the creature sets its own will against the will of the Creator. Adam went into his sin with open eyes; his willful act was the root form of what would eventually take shape as every idol that men have ever fashioned.

John ends his first epistle with the words: little children, keep yourselves from idols. He was not primarily thinking of sticks and stones. The idols that the apostle of love warns against are the idols of the self-will, the things that occupy the place in the soul that belongs to God alone. Self-will, self-pleasing, self-advancement, the setting up of my own judgment against God's word — these are all forms of idolatry. They come as a bundle with the other sins that attach to them: lying, theft, manipulation, discord in the home.

Rachel's Lie: What Idolatry Produces

Rachel hid the teraphim in the camel's furniture and sat upon them. When Laban came to search her tent, she said: let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee, for the custom of women is upon me. It is almost certain she was not telling the truth. She was determined to keep the teraphim in the house, and lying was the means by which she kept them. Idolatry encourages lying — or rather,

idolatry and lying come from the same root, the same willful displacement of truth by self-interest. The two things go together, just as Paul says fornication and idolatry went together among the heathen (1 Corinthians 10:14).

It was not being true to Jacob either. A husband and wife ought to be united in exercise before God, having one mind about what belongs in their home and what does not. To carry a secret idolatry into the household unbeknown to the head of the house is a form of the spiritual disorder that the New Testament consistently addresses in its teaching on marriage and the home. Jacob himself was innocent; he could speak strongly to Laban because he genuinely did not know. But the teraphim were in his household, being transported toward Bethel, making their way toward the house of God.

Teraphim Heading toward Bethel: The Incompatibility

Jacob's destination was Bethel — Beth-El, the house of God, the place where God had met him in his youth, where he had seen the ladder and the angels and heard the voice of the Lord. He was returning to that place. And in his household, without his knowledge, teraphim were making the same journey. The incompatibility is striking: household idols traveling toward the house of God. This is what sin does — it attaches itself to what is holy and drags it along as if the two were compatible. They are not.

Arise and Go Up to Bethel: Jacob's Exercise in Genesis 35

God's word to Jacob in Genesis 35:1 is: arise, go up to Bethel, and dwell there, and make there an altar unto God that appeared unto thee when thou fleddest from the face of Esau thy brother. The thought of the house of God before Jacob's soul produced an immediate moral effect. He called his household together and said three things: put away the strange gods that are among you; be clean; and change your garments.

These three things form a pattern of genuine spiritual exercise. Putting away the strange gods is the direct dealing with idolatry in whatever form it has taken. Being clean speaks of moral purity, the washing away of defilement. Changing garments speaks of a change of associations and conduct — how one appears and moves among others. Scripture uses the garment as the image of one's outward ways and connections. Jude speaks of the garments spotted by the flesh that are to be hated. God hates the garments spotted by the flesh. Jacob's command was to change them — to have ways and associations appropriate to one who is going up to the house of God.

The earrings were also to be removed. In a context of idolatrous practice, those earrings were associated with something that had to go. And heavy earrings pull the ear down, weigh on it, so that one does not hear well. There is a principle there about anything that hangs on the ear and dulls the hearing of God's word. They gave them all to Jacob, and he buried them under an oak at Shechem. The strange gods were put in the earth. Bethel was not approached with them still on hand.

What the thought of Bethel did for Jacob is what the thought of God's house should do for us. When the soul really apprehends where it is going — into the presence of God, to the place where God dwells, to the house of the living God — it recognizes that certain things are utterly unsuitable to that presence. Not rules from outside pressing in, but the sense of the holiness of the place itself producing a willing putting away of what does not belong there. That is the proper exercise.

Put away the strange gods that are among you, and be clean, and change your garments: and let us arise, and go up to Bethel.