

The Doctrine of Teraphim

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Preface: The terphim are household idols who are both related to divination and found in every major period of the Jewish Age. What we don't know is how they were consulted or even what they looked like.

1. The Hebrew word for *seraphim* is t^ṛâphîym (תְּרַפִּיִּים) [pronounced *tera-PHEEM*], which means *household idol, a kind of idol, an object of reverence, and a means of divination*, and is often transliterated *teraphim*. This word is not found in the singular; but then, neither is the word for *God (Elohim)*. Strong's #8655 BDB #1076.
2. The origin of the term *teraphim* is unknown. J. A. Motyer suggests the terms rāpā' (which means *to heal*), tārāp (which means *to decay*), or r^ṣpā'îm (which means *ghosts*).¹ This would suggest that teraphim had curative powers, that they represented that which was ancient and/or they represented that which was ethereal.
3. Apparently there is some suggestion that they were originally mummified human heads, a suggestion which Motyer tells us has no basis in fact.²
4. Scripture: Gen. 31:19, 34, 35 Judges 17:5 18:14, 17, 18, 20 1Sam. 15:23 19:13, 16 2Kings 23:24 Ezek. 21:21 Hosea 3:4 Zech. 10:2
5. Interestingly enough, these passages cover nearly every major period of the Jewish Age: the time of the Patriarchs, the time of the judges, the early monarchy, the late monarchy and the post-exile period.³
6. What we can deduce in general from these passages is that these teraphim are religious images and that they are sometimes consulted for guidance; and that they possibly acted as household protectors. It is not clear whether *teraphim* is strictly plural or whether it is used like the word *Elohim* (which can mean *God* or *gods*).
7. In the first passage, Jacob has had his fill of Laban, who was a great chiseler than Jacob himself, and he was leaving him and his employment, taking with him his two wives, the two daughters of Laban, and their personal maid servants. A split was long overdue, as Jacob had worked for Laban 20 years (Gen. 31:38). Rachel stole from her father the teraphim. What we know is that they were valuable (at least to Laban and Rachel), and that he chased them down and accused them of taking his teraphim. We also know that they are relatively small, as Rachel was able to fit them in the saddle of the camel and sit on them so as to hide them. We also know that these were idols, as Laban said to Jacob, "[Why did you steal my gods \(elohim\)?](#)" (Gen. 31:30).
8. If you read Gen. 31, you might wonder two things: why did Rachel steal them in the first place and why does Laban get so dramatic about it? Archeology tells us that *in Nuzi law, the possession of such idols by the*



From

<http://www.biblelight.net/hosea.htm>

¹ *The New Bible Dictionary*; ed. J. D. Douglas; InterVarsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 1253.

² *The New Bible Dictionary*; ed. J. D. Douglas; InterVarsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 1253.

³ Pointed out by *The New Bible Dictionary*; ed. J. D. Douglas; InterVarsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 1253.

woman's husband ensured for him the succession to the father-in-law's property. Oswalt tells us *their possession constituted the headship of the household with all of the rights attendant thereto. Rachel's theft of the teraphim...was an attempt to procure such headship for her husband, although it was rightfully her brother's. Laban's extreme displeasure is explicable in this light.*⁴ This also explains Laban's insistence that he and Jacob reach a legal agreement right then and there (Gen. 31:43–55).⁵



The two images on the left would be teraphim.

9. Household gods—figurines—have been discovered at Nuzi sites.⁶ Abram's father's name is Terah, indicating a close connection between their family and idolatry. This was one of the reasons Abram had to leave his family.
10. These "images," teraphim (see Judges 17:5; 18:14; etc.), were usually small (v. 34) human figurines, occasionally larger, often made of wood (1 Sam. 19:13-16). Near Eastern excavations have brought them to light in profuse numbers, made of wood, clay, and precious metals. Some represent male gods, but the majority are figurines of female deities 2 to 3 in. in length. They were used as household gods or were carried on the body as protective charms. Since most of them represent nude goddesses whose sexual features are accentuated, they were probably thought to promote fertility. This may be the reason Rachel especially cherished them. Cuneiform texts from Nuzi in Mesopotamia reveal that the household gods were inherited by adopted sons only when no actual sons were present at the father's death. If a man had sons, his gods could not go to his daughters. Rachel therefore had no right to her father's household gods, as Jacob frankly admitted (Gen. 31:32). Documents found at Nuzi, in Mesopotamia, indicate that in the patriarchal age the possession of the family's household gods, such as Laban had, guaranteed to their holder the title to his father's properties. This was probably the chief reason why Laban was so eager to retrieve them (see vs. 30, 33–35).⁷
11. The next time that we hear about teraphim is much later in the book of Judges. There is this man of Ephraim named Micah who builds himself a shrine and makes an ephod and teraphim. Then he goes out and hires a priest to be his personal household priest. From this passage, we know that there is a religious significance to these teraphim. An ephod, by the way, would be used to predict the future or to suggest a particular course of action.
12. In the next chapter of Judges, Danites who decide to seek some land further north, happen across Micah's house and speak to his personal priest (they apparently recognized his voice). He gives them what they believe to be good information, so when they return to the area of Micah's home, they steal his religious artifacts and his priest. It is again clear by this passage that the teraphim have religious significance and that *household idols* (or, *household idol*) is probably a very reasonable English rendering of *teraphim*. This particular group of Danites then set up their own northern shrine to the gods.
13. In many English translations, you may not notice that *teraphim* is found in 1Sam. 15:23. Recall the situation: Saul had disobeyed God and had allowed at least the king of the Amalekites to live, and he saved out the best of their livestock. Samuel chewed him out, and said, "[Is \[it\] pleasing to Y^ehowah with burnt offerings and sacrifices as listening \[and obeying\] the voice of Y^ehowah? Observe, listening \[and obeying\] more than](#)

⁴ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*; Merrill Tenney, ed., Zondervan Publishing House, ©1976; Vol. 5, p. 677.

⁵ *The New Bible Dictionary*; ed. J. D. Douglas; InterVarsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 1253; Motyer, the writer of this particular article, was quoting H. H. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord*, 1952, p. 302.

⁶ *The New Bible Dictionary*; ed. J. D. Douglas; InterVarsity Fellowship, 1962; ©by W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.; p. 1253. His source is G. E. Wright, *Biblical Archaeology*, 1957, p. 44. Nuzi, by the way, is a city in Northeastern Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq). The principle time of occupation would have been 15th–14th centuries B.C. However, the customs and lifestyle uncovered by archaeology probably were typical and dated back centuries. This information may be reasonably applied to the lives of Abram, Laban, Isaac and Jacob during the time period of the patriarchs. The picture is taken from http://www.abu.nb.ca/ecm/MTzion/Tablets_files/slide0037_image016.jpg.

⁷ This is quoted from a debate on Catholic images; the entire debate is found at <http://www.biblelight.net/hosea.htm>. The writer is Michael Scheifler. The black and white image is also taken from that site. I should mention that, even though I have quoted this person, this should in no way be seen as an endorsement of all his points of view pontificated at his website.

sacrifice; [it is more] pleasing to given attention [to His word is] more than the fat of rams. For the sin of divination [is] rebellion and iniquity and **teraphim** [is] being stubborn; since you reject the Word of Y^howah, He rejects you from [being] king.” Samuel equates the sin of divination with rebellion and iniquity; he equates the use of teraphim with being stubborn. He is saying that one is no better than the other. This passage along with Zech. 10:2 tell us that God took a very dim view of such idols (along with direct statements, e.g., Ex. 20:4–5).

14. In our passage (1Sam. 19:13), we have Michal using teraphim to put into David’s bed so that it appears as though he is sleeping there. This means that, in David’s household, they kept teraphim, or idolatrous household idols. It suggests that the teraphim was relatively large (or, that there was more than one). The implied difference in size from what we saw in the book of Genesis is easily explained, as she is the daughter of the king. Laban, the owner of the smaller idols, probably also owned a Ford Escort while Michal most certainly owned a fully-loaded SUV.
15. At this point, we may have to extrapolate and speculate somewhat. Back in 1Sam. 15, Saul was beginning to become more and more negative toward God. He flat out disobeyed God’s clear and direct orders and Samuel tells him that disobedience is the same as idolatry. This would suggest to me that Saul was not an idolater at the time. However, given the fact that Michal had a household idol or two, that would indicate that Saul possibly began incorporating these as part of a self-protection plan, seeing how he had been rejected by Jehovah, the God of Israel. His own use influenced his daughters and at least one of his daughters also had household idols, as we see here (it would have made less sense for her to go out and find some to use on a moment’s notice).
16. What this does is help to explain David’s options at this point. God has forced David to get away from Saul and to get away from his wife, Saul’s daughter, Michal. There is idolatry in their family and it is practiced to some degree in David’s own household. God cannot allow David to remain there. The point is that there is an issue which is not really raised in Scripture, but is an important factor in the options which God allows David (I should say option, as David’s choice is to get out of town and quickly).
17. We do not run into the word *teraphim* again until the Josiah reform, over 300 years later, when Josiah removes the mediums, spiritists, teraphim, idols and all other abominations from the land of Judah. 2Kings 23:24
18. Ezekiel also mentions the teraphim in a clearly negative way in Ezek. 21:21, where the king of Babylon consults them, along with other idolatrous artifacts.
19. Hosea also mentions the teraphim in a prophecy about Israel’s removal from history. **For the sons of Israel will remain for many days without a king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, and without ephod or teraphim** (Hosea 3:4). The idea is that Israel would not function as a nation for a long time.
20. Our last passage to mention the teraphim is Zech. 10:2, which portrays them again in a very unfavorable light: **“For the teraphim speak iniquity and the diviners see lying vision and tell false dreams. They comfort in vain. Therefore, the people wander like sheep and they are afflicted because there is no shepherd.”**
21. Our conclusion is simply that these were household figurines or idols which could have been used for protection, illness, or guidance. The Bible clearly indicates that these were idolatrous and there are several instances where God caused various believers to separate from places and circumstances where these images were.

Summary of the Doctrine of Teraphim

1. Teraphim are religious images and that they are sometimes consulted for guidance; and that they possibly acted as household protectors. It is not clear whether *teraphim* is strictly plural or whether it is used like the word Elohim (which can mean *God* or *gods*). These “images,” teraphim (see Judges 17:5; 18:14; etc.), were usually small (v. 34) human figurines, occasionally larger, often made of wood (1 Sam. 19:13-16). Near Eastern excavations have brought them to light in profuse numbers, made of wood, clay, and precious metals. Some represent male gods, but the majority are figurines of female deities 2 to 3 in. in length. They were used as household gods or were carried on the body as protective charms. Since most of them represent nude goddesses whose sexual features are accentuated, they were probably thought to promote fertility.
2. We find teraphim in pretty much every time period of the history of Israel. We find them in the time of the judges, in the time of the patriarchs, during the formation of the monarchy, during the late monarchy, and in

the post-exilic period. One might say that they are almost as pervasive in Israel's society as the picture of Jesus or the statues of Mary are in our society.

3. As found in Scripture:

- a. Laban had them and his daughter Rachel stole them from him. The importance of these teraphim is that they perhaps acted almost like a last will and testament; that is, the person in possession of them is figured to be entitled to the estate of the person to whom they originally belonged. That is, Rachel did not necessarily take these to worship, but to insure her inheritance from her father Laban. It is possible that she took the images because of their relationship with fertility. Gen. 31
- b. In the book of Judges, a man of Ephraim named Micah builds himself a shrine and makes an ephod and teraphim. Then he goes out and hires a priest to be his personal household priest. From this passage, we know that there is a religious significance to these teraphim. An ephod, by the way, would be used to predict the future or to suggest a particular course of action. Some Danites who decide to seek some land further north, happen across Micah's house and speak to his personal priest (they apparently recognized his voice). He gives them what they believe to be good information, so when they return to the area of Micah's home, they steal his religious artifacts and his priest. It is again clear by this passage that the teraphim have religious significance and that *household idols* (or, *household idol*) is probably a very reasonable English rendering of *teraphim*. This particular group of Danites then set up their own northern shrine to the gods.
- c. In 1Sam. 15:23, Saul disobeyed God and had allowed at least the king of the Amalekites to live, and he saved out the best of their livestock. Samuel chewed him out, saying, "Is [it] pleasing to Y^howah with burnt offerings and sacrifices as listening [and obeying] the voice of Y^howah? Observe, listening [and obeying is] more than sacrifice; [it is more] pleasing to given attention [to His word is] more than the fat of rams. For the sin of divination [is] rebellion and iniquity and **teraphim** [is] being stubborn; since you reject the Word of Y^howah, He rejects you from [being] king." Samuel equates the sin of divination with rebellion and iniquity; he equates the use of teraphim with being stubborn. He is saying that one is no better than the other. This passage along with Zech. 10:2 tell us that God took a very dim view of such idols (along with direct statements, e.g., Ex. 20:4–5).
- d. In 1Sam. 19:13, Michal uses teraphim to put into David's bed so that it appears as though he is sleeping there. This means that, in David's household, they kept teraphim, or idolatrous household idols. It suggests that the teraphim was relatively large (or, that there was more than one). The implied difference in size from what we saw in the book of Genesis is easily explained, as she is the daughter of the king. This suggests that God allowed Saul to drive David from his own home because idolatry was practiced there.
- e. At this point, we may have to extrapolate and speculate somewhat. Back in 1Sam. 15, Saul was beginning to become more and more negative toward God. He flat out disobeyed God's clear and direct orders and Samuel tells him that disobedience is the same as idolatry. This would suggest to me that Saul was not an idolater at the time. However, given the fact that Michal had a household idol or two, that would indicate that Saul possibly began incorporating these as part of a self-protection plan, seeing how he had been rejected by Jehovah, the God of Israel. His own use influenced his daughters and at least one of his daughters also had household idols, as we see here (it would have made less sense for her to go out and find some to use on a moment's notice).
- f. 300 years later, Josiah removes the mediums, spiritists, teraphim, idols and all other abominations from the land of Judah. 2Kings 23:24
- g. The prophets speak negatively of these teraphim. Ezek. 21:21 Hosea 3:4 Zech. 10:2. Hosea even suggests that Israel's idolatry would keep Israel from functioning as a national entity for a long time.

4. Our conclusion is simply that these were household figurines or idols which could have been used for protection, illness, guidance; and that they may be related to inheritance. The Bible clearly indicates that these were idolatrous and there are several instances where God caused various believers to separate from places and circumstances where these images were.

And just in case you don't look this up,...

A Brief Summary of Teraphim

Teraphim are religious images and that they are sometimes consulted for guidance; and that they possibly acted as household protectors. It is not clear whether *teraphim* is strictly plural or whether it is used like the word Elohim (which can mean *God* or *gods*). These “images,” teraphim (see Judges 17:5; 18:14; etc.), were usually small (v. 34) human figurines, occasionally larger, often made of wood (1 Sam. 19:13-16). Near Eastern excavations have brought them to light in profuse numbers, made of wood, clay, and precious metals. Some represent male gods, but the majority are figurines of female deities 2 to 3 in. in length. They were used as household gods or were carried on the body as protective charms. Since most of them represent nude goddesses whose sexual features are accentuated, they were probably thought to promote fertility. It is possible that they are related to the inheritance of the property or business of one’s family.

We find teraphim in pretty much every time period of the history of Israel. We find them in the time of the judges, in the time of the patriarchs, during the formation of the monarchy, during the late monarchy, and in the post-exilic period. They are always spoken of in a negative way.

Here are the passages wherein we find *teraphim* mentioned: Gen. 31:19, 34, 35 Judges 17:5 18:14, 17, 18, 20 1Sam. 15:23 19:13, 16 2Kings 23:24 Ezek. 21:21 Hosea 3:4 Zech. 10:2

These may be likened to the pictures of the painting of Jesus which we have or the ubiquitous statues of Mary. However, those things are not formally related to inheritance today, it is reasonable that if a Catholic denounced these as idolatry, that some families would cut them off from their inheritance.

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