

Daddy's Gods Are Missing!

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August 2018

Worshipping "household gods" sounds strange to most folks today, although it is still done in some parts of the world. The idea that there isn't one God or even several "big gods," but rather lots and lots of little gods that watch over individual families, is very old. In some cases, these "gods" are thought to be the spirits of a family's ancestors, and they may be represented by little statues or amulets or even little paintings. The family might even treat them like part of the family and eat dinner with them!

Household gods are sometimes mentioned in the Bible and, in Jacob's case, they actually caused him some unexpected trouble—although maybe not for the reason you might expect. This story, which tells what happened after "Spotted and Spotless, Light and Dark," comes from Genesis 31:1-55.

As Jacob's flocks grew and he became richer and richer,
Laban's sons grumbled and became more and more jealous.
They said that Jacob was stealing from their father!
And it became very plain to Jacob
that they liked him less and less.

That's when God told Jacob to pack up his family
and go back to his mother and father,
and He repeated His promise to Jacob,
that He would be with him and take care of him.

So, Jacob called his two wives, Rachel and Leah,
and asked them to meet him in the fields
where he was tending the sheep.

"You've seen how your father is treating me.
He made a deal to pay me for herding his sheep
and he says I've cheated him.
But God has seen what is in his heart.

During the mating season God gave me a dream,
showing me that he would cause only the speckled sheep
to mate with my sheep, and that he would make my flock grow.
He told me that He had seen all that Laban had done to me
and that He would bless me anyway, just as He promised.
So, get ready to leave this place,
because God is sending us back to my home."

His wives said, "That suits us just fine!
We won't inherit anything from him now;
he treats us the same as he treats his slaves.
There's nothing for us here anymore!
The riches God has given you
legally belong to us and our children anyway.
So, do whatever God has told you to do;
we're ready to go with you, whenever you're ready to go."

So, Jacob wasted no time.

He put his wives and children
and everything they owned on camels and,
driving his herds of sheep in front of them,
they headed out toward the land of Canaan where his father lived.
When they left, Laban was quite some distance away,
shearing his own sheep,
and he didn't know they were gone!

But before they left, Rachel stole her father's household gods
and took them with her.
No one knows exactly why she took them,
but many people thought the gods of a house
kept watch on what happened
and would tell others what they saw,
so perhaps she hoped to keep their destination secret.

It was nearly three days before Laban realized that Jacob had left.
But when he did—and saw that his house's gods were also gone—
he gathered some of his relatives and set out after him.
They caught up with Jacob seven days later...
but not before God warned him to be careful about what he did to Jacob!

Laban, however, was furious. He accused Jacob of stealing his gods
and his daughters and his grandchildren.

But Jacob told Laban he hadn't stolen anything
and then told him to search everything he owned.
"If anyone stole your gods, may they die for it!
But if you find anything here that is yours, I promise to give it back."
He didn't know Rachel had taken the gods.

Rachel hid them in her camel's saddle in her tent.
Then she sat on the saddle and, when her father came in to search,
she begged his forgiveness for not getting up;
she said she was sick.

So, Laban searched everywhere else, in all of Jacob's tents,
but he found nothing. Then Jacob said,
"I worked for you for twenty years but never took anything that was yours.
If any of your sheep were killed by wolves, I replaced it with one of my own
whether it was my fault or not.
And this is how you thank me! You brought our relatives with you;
Ask them who the real thief is!"

So, Laban made peace with Jacob there.
Jacob stacked a pile of stones there, as a reminder that they had made their peace.

That place was called Mizpah, and even now
you can buy what is called a "Mizpah Coin."
It's a coin with the following verse on it:

*May the Lord keep watch between me and you
while we are apart, one from another.*

And that coin is cut in half, and each piece is part of a necklace
which two people can wear as a sign of their friendship.

And after they made peace,
Laban kissed his daughters and each of his grandchildren goodbye.
Then he returned to his home
and Jacob took his family back to Canaan,
where God blessed them as He had promised.

For you see, eventually Jacob had twelve children...
and each of their families became the twelve tribes of Israel.