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**Nuzi Tablets
By Biblical Training Organization Library**

**NUZI** [nōō’ zĭ]

A town occupied by Hurrians in the second millennium B.C. The name is always written in cuneiform [an ancient wedge-shaped script] as Nu-zi, and has not yet been found in any case other than the genitive [the case expressing ownership].

**LOCATION AND IMPORTANCE**

The remains of Nuzi were buried in the mound of Yorghan Tepe, about nine miles west of the modern town of Kirkut in northeastern Mesopotamia. It was excavated in 1925-1931 by the American Schools of Oriental Research in conjunction with the Harvard University Museum. The importance of Nuzi for the Bible student results from the fact that the 4000 clay tablets found there probably give a fuller picture of the life of the individual citizens of the place than can be gained for any other town in the ancient Near E, with the possible exception of Mari. However, at Mari most of the tablets deal mainly with the royal family and its political activities, while at Nuzi there were found records of the life and activity of hundreds of ordinary citizens. Still more important to the Bible student is the fact that at many points the customs evidenced in these tablets show a remarkable similarity to those described in the Book of Genesis. Thus the Nuzi material is valuable for corroborating the accuracy of Genesis and also for giving a better understanding of its meaning. This article will pass over the many references to features of life that probably were common in most parts of Near E at that time, but will note particularly a few that are valuable for throwing special light on the Book of Genesis.

**RELATION TO GENESIS**

**Connection with Haran**

Haran in northern Mesopotamia, is important in Biblical history. It was here that Abram lived for many years before moving on to Canaan. Many of his relatives remained in Haran. Rebekah was brought from Haran to marry Isaac. Jacob returned to the home of his uncle Laban in Haran and spent many years there.

Although Nuzi is far to the east of Haran, both cities were a part of the region occupied by the Hurrians during the second millennium B.C., and it is therefore not surprising to find that many of the customs and laws evidenced in Nuzi between 1500 and 1400 B.C. are reflected in the activities of the patriarchs at a somewhat earlier period.

**The importance of written documents**

There was a time when it was widely held that the Pentateuch could not have been written by Moses because it was thought that at that time writing had not been invented. While there is now abundant evidence to the contrary from various sources, it is of particular interest to note that at Nuzi at this early time written documents were extremely important and a great many of them were produced.

**Adoption**

Dozens of adoption tablets have been found at Nuzi. Israelite law, so detailed on many subjects, contains no regulations for adoption, and the history of the Hebrews in Palestine after the Conquest, as recorded in the OT contains no evidence of such a practice. But, at Nuzi, it was customary, if a man had no children, to adopt someone to carry on his name and inherit his property. This seems to be reflected in the statement of Abraham, before Isaac was born, that unless the Lord should give him a child, Eliezer of Damascus would be his heir ([Genesis 5:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+5.2&t=NKJV)).

**Teraphim, or household gods**

The incident of the Teraphim ([Genesis 31:17-35](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+31.17-35&t=NKJV)) was extremely puzzling before the discovery of the Nuzi documents. When Jacob determined to leave his uncle Laban [[Audio]](http://netministries.org/BBasics/bbw/bbWL1.wav), Rachel stole Laban’s teraphim or household gods. Returning to his home, Laban was greatly excited, not simply because his daughters and his son-in-law had left without notice, nor because of the great amount of property that they had taken with them, which Jacob had amassed during his sojourn in Haran but primarily because of the loss of the household gods.

Jacob, with his great number of flocks and herds, must have had a sizable number of shepherds, and it would have required a considerable force to overcome the resistance that he could offer. Laban pursued Jacob three days, taking with him a sufficient number of supporters to cause Jacob to be terrified at his approach. Thus the pursuit of Jacob was a very expensive proposition for Laban. In the [Middle Ages](http://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/middle-ages) students wondered why Laban would have gone to so much expense and trouble on account of these household gods. It was suggested that the teraphim might have been made of gold. Even if this were the case their intrinsic value would hardly have been enough to pay for Laban’s expedition, since they were very small. This was evident from the fact that Rachel was able to hide them in the saddle-basket on which she was sitting in her tent. Though her father searched the tent most thoroughly, he never suspected their presence.

The mystery became still greater when it was noticed that Jacob was utterly shocked at the idea that he might have stolen the teraphim. When Laban was unable to find them, Jacob bitterly rebuked him for his suspicion ([Genesis 31:36-42](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+31.36-42&t=NKJV)).

Previous to the discovery of the Nuzi documents, the whole situation was obscure, and it would have been equally so at the time of the Israelite kingdom when, according to the critics, the story would have been composed. The tablets from Nuzi show that according to Hurrian custom at that early time, if a man desired to appoint a son-in-law as his principal heir he would turn over to him his household gods. After the man’s death, appearance in court with the household gods would be accepted as proof of such a disposition. Rachel was trying to secure all of Laban’s property for her husband, and Jacob was rightfully indignant at being accused of attempting such an underhanded trick. The whole incident becomes understandable in the light of these facts, and it becomes clear why Laban, still suspicious, desired that a boundary stone be put up at Mizpah, and that Jacob should swear that he would not pass over this boundary in order to do him harm ([Genesis 31:44-53](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+31.44-53&t=NKJV), especially [Genesis 31:52](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+31.52&t=NKJV)). The Nuzi tablets make it clear that a great part of Laban’s reason for this was his desire that at his death, the remainder of his property should go to his own sons and not be taken away from them by Jacob. It is good to note that later Jacob demanded that any strange gods in the hands of his people be buried ([Genesis 35:2-4](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+35.2-4&t=NKJV)), and that at no time did Jacob try to make false use of these teraphim.

**Sisterhood**

To the modern reader it seems strange that Abraham should have said that Sarah was his sister instead of stating what to Pharaoh was the more important fact, that she was his wife ([Genesis 12:11-20](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+12.11-20&t=NKJV)). It is still stranger that he should have repeated this act in the land of Abimelech [[Audio]](http://netministries.org/BBasics/bbw/bbWa12.wav) ([Genesis 20:1-18](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+20.1-18&t=NKJV)), and perhaps even more so that Isaac should later have followed his example ([Genesis 26:6-16](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+26.6-16&t=NKJV)). It has been suggested that light may be thrown on these perplexing incidents by the discovery at Nuzi, as evidenced by many legal contracts, that a position called “sisterhood” was there considered to be of even more importance than that of a wife, and that a wife was sometimes elevated by a special act to this superior position. In view of the evidence that this was the custom in the area in which Abraham had spent many years, it is not impossible that Abraham and Isaac may have felt that they were giving their wives a more important and secure position by calling them sisters. Since such a custom was evidently unknown to Pharaoh or to Abimelech an unfortunate situation resulted. Yet, although Pharaoh and Abimelech accused the patriarchs of misrepresentation, there is no evidence in the Scripture of Abraham and Isaac having felt guilty or of God having condemned them for their words. God punished Pharaoh and Abimelech for what they had done, but, as far as we know, He did not rebuke Abraham. Therefore it is not impossible that it was a case of misunderstanding rather than of misrepresentation. The incident is quite understandable from this viewpoint in the light of the Nuzi documents. In such a case it is hard to imagine that the story could have originated in the time of the Israelite kingdom when this custom would have been completely unknown.

**Hagar**

There is a similar situation in the events concerned with Hagar and Ishmael. It might seem strange that Sarah should have requested Abraham to impregnate her maidservant Hagar in order that she might raise up a son for Sarah ([Genesis 16:2](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+16.2&t=NKJV)). Again the Nuzi documents show that what occurred was exactly in line with the customs at Haran. In the Hurrian society, where the son was so very important, if a wife did not have a son it was regular practice for her to provide her husband with a slave-wife for this purpose.

Prior to the discoveries at Nuzi a certain amount of light had been thrown on this incident by somewhat similar regulations in the [Code of Hammurabi](http://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/code-hammurabi), which was discovered in 1901. Yet this did not entirely solve the problem, for in that Code (paragraph 144) only a priestess is specifically given this right, and she is not entitled to claim the concubine’s children for herself.

**The maidservants of Leah and Rebekah**

Until recently critical students have been united in declaring that the statements in [Genesis 29:24](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+29.24&t=NKJV), [29](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+29.29&t=NKJV) that Laban gave a named maidservant to each of his daughters were clearly later interpolations from the P document [the Priestly source (P): hypothetically written 500 BCE by Kohanim (Jewish priests) in exile in Babylon] and out of harmony with the rest of the story, which they attributed to an earlier document. It is evident, however, from the Nuzi tablets, that at the time of Jacob it was in that civilization a normal part of a marriage agreement that the father-in-law should give the bride a maid, her name being regularly specified in these documents.

**The Habiru**

Nuzi tablets are also of importance because of the continuing discussion as to the origin of the term Heb. [Genesis 14:13](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+14.13&t=NKJV) mentions “Abram the Hebrew,” and in [Genesis 40:15](https://www.blueletterbible.org/search/preSearch.cfm?Criteria=Genesis+40.15&t=NKJV) Joseph tells the Egyptians that he was stolen out of “the land of the Hebrews.” These occurrences make it seem unlikely that the term originally meant simply a descendant of Jacob, or even a descendant of Abraham. Nuzi is only one of various sources in the Near E where ancient documents refer to a people called the Ha-bi-ru who seem to have been landless wanderers, sometimes entering into voluntary servitude. Although Nuzi material contains a number of such references, they are insufficient to solve the problem, but may form an important link in its examination. *See* [Habiru, Hapiru](http://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/habiru-hapiru).

**Other points of contact**

Since the contracts, wills, memoranda and other types of material in the Nuzi documents give a varied and extensive picture of many phases of life, scholars point out still other similarities between its customs or laws and those of Genesis. Some of these represent features common to other portions of ancient Near Eastern civilization. Others are equally true of later periods of Biblical history. In this article the attempt has been made to confine the discussion mainly to such matters as are peculiar to the time of the patriarchs, which therefore may provide strong support for the idea that the Genesis narrative is true, and also that it was written at an early time, before Hurrian customs and laws had disappeared as a result of the on-march of the Assyrian conquerors.