

Iraq My Handiwork

By Isam Ghattas and Ron Brackin

Introduction

Thirty-some thousand feet below lay the war zone known as Iraq.

Isam and the Manara Book Ministry (Appendix IV) teams had seen it many times over the past dozen or so years. I had seen it when I was a kid through the eyes of a Vizier's daughter named Shaharazade and more recently through the dusty lenses of Fox News and CNN cameras.

The “shock and awe” stopped nearly ten months ago. Now, the Iraqi mood is more like “stress and angst.”

I write this not long after Saddam was captured in a “rat hole” and put behind bars. Since then, attacks by Iraqi resistance against Coalition forces have dropped from 40 or 50 a day to about 10 or 12. And the interim Iraqi government has not yet replaced the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA).

It's an interesting experience to land at Saddam International Airport (renamed Baghdad International after it was secured by the U.S. Army's 3rd Infantry Division). All the airspace is military now, and our twin-prop, 18-seater is restricted to a narrow, closely-watched corridor. Once over the city, we begin a slow spiral down. Suddenly, our port wing tips up, the starboard wing tips down, and we drop about 10,000 feet in a few seconds. Our vital organs are sucked into our shoes. We take a lap, then drop another 10,000 feet. But it's worth following procedures to avoid being shot out of the sky.

The present incarnation of Iraq was carved out by the British after World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The Arabs expected independence; the League of Nations placed them under a British mandate. Winston Churchill, along with other officials, drew up innovative boundaries embracing the Kurdish district around Mosul in the north, the Sunni Arab district around Baghdad in the middle and the Shiite district in the south around Basra – a volatile formula that virtually guaranteed instability.

The new borders excluded Kuwait, which had been part of the Basra district under the Ottoman Turks. That gambit would backfire after a ruthless young nationalist named Saddam Hussein seized the reins.

For a modern international airport, it was eerily empty. No one else coming in; no one going out. Just armed security guards, work lights and echoes.

One of the guards accompanied us onto a shuttle bus, and we snaked our way through concrete barriers and drove to the checkpoint between the airport and Baghdad. Once inside the fenced compound, we were questioned and handed off to Nepalese troops until our van arrived to take us the rest of the way into the city.

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Charred Iraqi tanks were still visible along the sides of the road or lying in sand holes where they had dug in. It was not difficult to imagine what it was like when our tanks and humvees thundered into Baghdad back in April.

Just ahead was a crushed, trampled down area where a hundred-tank Iraqi barricade had been blasted and burned.

No one shot at us as we drove in, but we knew it could happen at any time. It happened every day. While resistance attacks against military targets declined, terrorist attacks against civilian targets were on the rise.

We crossed the ancient Tigris River and entered Baghdad – a far cry from *1,001 Arabian Nights*. (Appendix I)

Houses dirty and in disrepair. Highways scored by tank treads. Deep, muddy pits were gouged out of side streets. Shops and stores lined the roads. Sidewalks groaned under towers of boxed Western kitchen appliances and home entertainment equipment. Old cars, new cars, bicycles, donkey carts, trucks, mopeds, mangy horses, tractor trailers and tankers congested the streets and turnabouts. Women dressed head to toe in black chador begged drivers and pedestrians for alms. Gas fumes choked the air.

We passed the towering Media Ministry building and the immense Iraqi National Theatre. Both had been bombed; the former was totally gutted. Between their bases sat a miracle. A little single-story church, totally untouched. Such was the precision of the bombing – and the power of God's protective hand. The Communications Tower. Ministry of Trade. Months ago, they appeared all green and flashing as I watched through the sleepless eyes of the news networks. Now they were gray and charred and smelled burnt.

Baghdad's more than 5 million people still had no telephone service. Electricity was an on-again/off-again affair, with the emphasis on the latter. Automatic weapons fire popped here and there. Explosions rumbled. They were often close by, but there was no telling who was doing what to whom. Thick black smoke filled the sky. It wasn't from one of the refineries, because the refineries were over there and the smoke was over here. But there was no telling what made the smoke.

Outside Baghdad, it was worse.

There are only a dozen or so real cities in this country. The rest is desert or broad plains with reedy marshes along the border with Iran and mountains in the north. Despite its history as the Fertile Crescent and Cradle of Civilization, only 12 percent of Iraq today is fit for cultivation. In the summer, the heat and sandstorms are suffocating (140 degrees Fahrenheit is not unusual. One GI told me it hit 152 degrees once last summer).

Scattered throughout this arid wilderness beyond the cities lives the rural portion of Iraq's 24 million souls. Bedouin, with their obedient flocks and black tents, dot the landscape. Here and there, where you least expect it, lies a tiny village that hasn't changed in four centuries.

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Estimates vary as to the racial distribution of the Iraqi population. But the Central Intelligence Agency believes it to be about 75-80 percent Arab, 15-20 percent Turkoman and about 5 percent Assyrian along with whatever is left over.

Religion breaks down to 97 percent Muslim and 3 percent Christian “or other.” The Muslims are further identified as mostly Shi’a and about 35 percent Sunni.

Thanks to three decades of Saddam and a dozen years of sanctions, the Iraqi economy plunged from about three U.S. dollars to the dinar to around 3,000 dinar to the dollar. Literacy plummeted, too. Today, only four out of ten Iraqis, 16 and older, can read and write.

As unfortunate as these statistics are, they are not unique. There are poorer countries. There are people groups farther behind the times. Iraq is not the only country to welcome terrorists.

So why this book about Iraq? What makes this little Middle Eastern country so special?

Two things.

1) Iraq’s past, and 2) Iraq’s future.

Sadly, some of the greatest records of its past were stolen and destroyed by looters during the initial days of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Robert Fisk, Middle East Correspondent for the *Independent* of London, mourned its loss as he walked through the rubble of Iraq's National Archaeological Museum:

“They lie across the floor in tens of thousands of pieces, the priceless antiquities of Iraq's history. The looters had gone from shelf to shelf, systematically pulling down the statues and pots and amphorae of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, the Sumerians, the Medes, the Persians and the Greeks and hurling them onto the concrete.

“A glass case that had once held 40,000-year-old stone and flint objects had been smashed open. It lay empty. No one knows what happened to the Assyrian reliefs from the royal palace of Khorsabad, nor the 5,000-year-old seals nor the 4,500-year-old gold leaf earrings once buried with Sumerian princesses. It will take decades to sort through what they have left, the broken stone torsos, the tomb treasures, the bits of jewelry glinting amid the piles of smashed pots.

“Only a few weeks ago, Jabir Khalil Ibrahim, the director of Iraq's State Board of Antiquities, referred to the museum's contents as ‘the heritage of the nation.’ They were, he said, ‘not just things to see and enjoy. We get strength from them to look to the future.’”

“A Civilization Torn to Pieces,” by Robert Fisk, Sunday, April 13, 2003, © 2003 Independent Digital (UK) Ltd

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Though many of the ancient artifacts are lost, much of Iraq's history is preserved forever and indestructible on the pages of Scripture.

Countless chapters of Christian history – as well as the history of mankind – were written here. Iraq is the codifier of law, multiplier of languages, founder of agriculture and developer of written communication. It is also the country mentioned most frequently in the Bible, save for Israel.

But you won't find the word "Iraq" in your concordance. Theories concerning the term's etymology vary, several of the most popular being that a) it comes from biblical Erech, b) it is an Arabic term for the geographical area in the south-central portion of the country, or c) it is a modern spelling of *Uruk*, an ancient Sumerian city state.

To find Iraq in the Bible, you must play detective and look for it under its aliases: *Mesopotamia*, the *land of Shinar*, *Assyria*, *Babylon*, *Ur of the Chaldeans*, *Tigris*, *Euphrates* and *Nineveh*. You must search for clues in Genesis, Kings and Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Jonah, Acts, Peter's letters and John's revelatory vision. After a while, it will seem as though you can't turn a page of Scripture without running smack into Iraq . . . and reel as you read yet another account of its rebellious and bloody history.

But God has not abandoned Iraq, for all of its evil, cruelty and violence. He has used it in the past to accomplish his will, and today's Iraqi church is convinced that he will use it again.

In the following pages, then, you will walk through Scripture and see a land intertwined with man's destiny and God's plans. Further on, you will meet some of your brothers and sisters – faithful Christ-followers who, while missiles rained down on them in two Gulf wars, shouted desperate prayers of faith with their families and congregations. Who suffered under Saddam's bloody regime. And who now watch in awe as God's hand begins to move in ways they had never dared to dream.

Through it all, you will be given a fresh look at Iraq, not through the eyes of the Western media or even through history. You will gaze through the eyes of the ancient prophets. You will look ahead through the ages to the fulfillment of a divine promises that will one day affect everyone on earth.

Admittedly, our introduction is dated – January 2004, to be precise. The Bible, however, is not dated. And that is what this book is all about. Iraq in the Bible. And God's people in Iraq.

We begin at the beginning – the *very* beginning . . .