

## CHAPTER ONE

### IN THE WAKE OF SHOCK & AWE

My (Ron's) part of the story started in January 2004, thirty thousand feet over the warzone known as Iraq.

Isam and the Manara International teams had seen it many times over the past dozen or so years. I had sort of seen it when I was a kid through the eyes of a Vizier's daughter named Scheherazade and more recently through the dusty lenses of FOX News and CNN cameras.

The "shock and awe" had stopped nearly ten months earlier. Now, the Iraqi mood was more like "stress and angst."

The interim Iraqi government had not yet replaced the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). Saddam had recently been found hiding in a "rat hole" and put behind bars, but it would be nearly three years before he would be convicted by an Iraqi Special Tribunal of crimes against humanity and hanged.

Since his capture, attacks by Iraqi resistance against Coalition forces had dropped from forty or fifty a day to about ten or twelve.

It was an interesting experience to land at Saddam International Airport (renamed Baghdad International after it was secured by the U.S. Army's 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division). All the airspace was military, and our eighteen-seat twin-prop was restricted to a narrow, closely-monitored corridor. Once over the city, we begin a slow spiral down. Suddenly, our port wing tipped up, the starboard wing tipped down, and we dropped about ten thousand feet in a few seconds. Our vital organs were sucked into our shoes. We took a lap, then dropped another ten thousand feet. But it was worth following procedures to avoid being shot out of the sky.

The present incarnation of Iraq was carved out by the British after WWI 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 subjective boundaries which embraced the Kurdish district around Mosul in the north, the Sunni Arab district around Baghdad in the middle, and the Shi'a 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 leaving. 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.

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

Just ahead was a crushed, trampled 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 everyday. While resistance attacks against military targets had declined, terrorists 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*.

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, creating a bizarre incongruity. Old cars, new cars, bicycles, donkey carts, trucks, mopeds, mangy horses, tractor trailers, and tankers congested the streets and turnabouts. Women dressed crown-to-sole in black chador begged drivers and pedestrians for alms. Gas fumes choked the air.



Iraqi National Theatre (photo source unknown)

We passed the towering Media Ministry building and the immense Iraqi National Theatre. Both had been bombed; the former was gutted. Between their charred foundations 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 smoke-stained and smelled like old campfires.

Baghdad's more than five 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 way to tell 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.

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 twelve percent of Iraq today is fit for cultivation. In the summer, the heat and sandstorms are suffocating (145°F is not unusual; one GI told me he saw it hit 152°).



Scattered throughout this arid wilderness beyond the cities lives the rural portion of Iraq's twenty-four 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.

Estimates vary as to the racial distribution of the Iraqi population. But the CIA put it at about 75-80 percent Arab, 15-20 percent Turkoman, and about 5 percent Assyrian, along with whatever's left over.

Religion breaks out 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 \$3 to the dinar to around 3,000 dinar to the dollar. Literacy plummeted, too. Only four out of ten Iraqis, sixteen 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. And Iraq is not the only country infested with terrorists.

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

Iraq's past.

Iraq's future.



Mushin Hasan, deputy director of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad, sits on destroyed artifacts in April 2003. Photograph: Mario Tama/Getty

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 5000-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."<sup>1</sup>

Though many of the ancient artifacts were lost, an amazing amount 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—are written here. Iraq is the codifier of law, disseminator of languages, founder of agriculture, and birthplace of written communication. It is also the country mentioned most frequently in the Bible, save for Israel.



You won't find the word "Iraq" in any 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 Urek, 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 hardly turn a page of Scripture without running smack into Iraq ... and cringe 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.

We begin at the beginning—the very beginning ...

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<sup>i</sup> Robert Fisk, "A Civilization Torn to Pieces," *Independent Digital* (UK) Ltd, Sunday, April 13, 2003.