

“By the Waters of Babylon”

Todd Pitock

BAGHDAD — The word *Babylon* had a magical ring, and from Baghdad, fifty miles to the north, I could hear its toll beckon.

My interpreter, Wada, arranged a driver to take us for the day for \$50. The going rate for drivers was from \$3 to \$15, but Wada (wa-DAH) felt for his country's suffering masses and was on his own wealth redistribution campaign, negotiating most of my prices upward. Now he had found a special.

It sounds a little expensive, I said.

We need a good car, he said. His clunker had taken a daily battering on the mad, mad streets of Baghdad, but its conspicuous damage made him less of a target of roaming thieves and gangsters. I was less afraid of car-jackers and gunmen than traffic. I'd heard about the former but had been getting a daily dose of terror from the latter. Without a seat belt, I'd grip the handle so hard the tendons in my palms were beginning to strain.

Fifty dollars?

That includes all the fuel, Wada said. It cost about a dollar to fill a tank. And I also have some other people I have to pay.

I had made the journey all the way from Jerusalem in November. Iraq was of course a big story, *the* story, and having recently finished one of my own in the form of a novel, I was looking for new material. I flew to Israel, where I had magazine assignments, and spent five days in Jerusalem, where mention of my Baghdad plans elicited more than a few looks of wonder. A lot of Israelis have roots in Iraq; 130,000 came in the 1940s and early 1950s in Operation Ezra and Nechemia. (Former Israeli Knesset member Shlomo Hillel, who headed the mission, called his book *Operation Babylon*. [Doubleday, 1987])

As in many exile and emigrant communities, they still eat the same foods and reminisce about Baghdad and Basra. My wife and I had actually once lived among them in a section of Ramat Gan where older residents still spoke Hebrew with Arabic accents and hung out at cafés playing *sheish beish*. Coincidentally, the neighborhood was hit by the first scud missiles fired at Israel in the first Gulf War.

Other Israelis regarded my proposed journey curiously, sometimes, to me, ironically so. Since my plan was to

cross into Jordan from Bet Shean, my friend and I spent the morning driving through the Territories and made a stop in Eli, a settlement near Nablus inhabited by intensely, some say, fanatically, religious Zionists, whose fenced-in community nursery is guarded by a skinny fellow with a thick black beard holding a well-thumbed Tanach in one hand and an M-16 in the other.

One young mother looked at me slack-jawed. Baghdad? she said. You're Jewish? Do you have children? She did. After her neighbors in the settlement were ambushed and shot, her four-year-old son, a playmate of the murdered couple, stopped speaking, and when he started again, he had a stutter.

How she could choose to live there, in a siege of sorts, was beyond me, and from the look she gave me, it was evident that choosing to visit Iraq was beyond her. The difference between us, I thought, was that I recognized that I was making a brief visit to a war zone, while she didn't seem to acknowledge that she was living permanently within one.

A few hours later, a bus shuttled across the Sheik Hussein Bridge into Jordan, and I shared a two-hour taxi trip with two American missionaries to Amman. Christian Americans in the Middle East tend to fall into two discrete and strident categories: pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian, and there does not seem to be much nuance on either side. The pro-Israel faction, the Christian Zionists, tend to see the conflict as part of a 2000-year-old religious progression, of which current events are part of a pre-ordained outcome. They have committed Old and New Testament to memory, and can easily cite chapter and verse to explain current (and future) events. The pro-Palestinian faction, on the other hand, tends to be more politicized, less patronizing than Christian Zionists, and much more angry. Within an hour of arriving in Amman, I experienced both sides, with an American peace activist distilling the entire conflict to one basic problem, the pervasive Israeli racism toward Palestinians.

Just before dawn, my driver picked me up and we made the 600-mile journey through the eye-squinting sunlight of the Western Desert to Baghdad. The Iraqi highway was three-lanes on either side, but arriving into Baghdad, we were greeted by cars driving the wrong way towards us. It's okay, my driver said, pressing on along the shoulder of the road until we encountered the reason the other drivers had turned around: a tank was pointing its gun at us. A Chinook helicopter had just been downed, killing all 17 American soldiers on board.

TODD PITOCK writes full time and has contributed to a variety of national publications, among them The New York Times, The Washington Post, and National Geographic Traveler. He is based in Villanova, Pennsylvania.

Ramadan had started with a bang, the troops called it Bombadan for all the deadly explosions, and Saddam was about five weeks from being captured.

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Visiting Babylon, the ancient seat of Mesopotamia where the enslaved Jews had wept by its waters after the First Exile, six centuries before the Common Era, had been high on my to-do list. Though Judaism is less important to the history of Iraq than Iraq is to the history of Judaism, the connection runs through five millennia. The legendary site of the Garden of Eden is in southern Iraq, as is Abraham's birth and life in Ur. In Sura and Pumpedita, the Babylonian Talmud, which defined much of modern Judaism, was compiled. Jonah fled Nineveh, the great northern city of Mesopotamia, and Babylon, the great southern city, was where Ezekiel, Ezra, and Daniel had their trials and triumphs.

In some ways, the first generation of Babylonian Jews is a mirror-opposite of the Hebrews in Egypt. The latter came voluntarily because of famine and thrived until the host culture saw their prosperity as a threat and enslaved them. In contrast, the Babylonian Jews were brought as captives after the destruction of the First Temple in 586 BCE and later adapted quite well. The first of the great Babylonian Jewish prophets, Daniel, had Joseph's power of interpreting dreams, which Nebuchadnezzar rewarded, like Pharaoh with Joseph, by making him governor.

Ezekiel offers a detailed census of the 50,000 Jews who chose to return to Jerusalem after the new conqueror King Cyrus of Persia granted permission for them to do so, in 538 BCE. But many Babylonian Jews chose to stay, so that Babylonia/Mesopotamia/Iraq has the longest documented Jewish presence in the world. Though not free of problems, including a two-day pogrom in 1941 remembered as the *farhoud*, life was, for the most part, quite good. As recently as the 1920s, a quarter of Baghdad's population was Jewish, with numerous neighborhoods, synagogues, and Jewish day schools. As Mona Yahia notes, in *When the Grey Beetles Took Over Baghdad*, a novel about Baghdadi Jews in the 1960s, the community spoke Arabic in a distinctive way that marked them as Jews, bringing to mind certain speech patterns of, say, thriving communities in places like New York and Johannesburg.

Even now, the emigrants still think of themselves as Babylonian Jews, with a global Diaspora of some 300,000 exiles and descendants held together with social networks, organizations, and publications. Many say they'd like to visit once it is safe to do so, and at least one, Naim Dangoor, dreams of restoring the community. The London-based 87-year-old, whose grandfather was the Chief Rabbi of Baghdad, has put aside a portion of his \$25 million Exilarch Foundation to fund any Jews who want to move back.

Why not? Dangoor said, in response to my skepticism, at his London office last September. Jews are merchants, and merchants go where there are markets.

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It's almost certainly true that there's money to be made in Iraq, but it's not a good time to be a Jew there. Anti-

semitism and paranoia about Jews and Israel are at once fierce and matter-of-fact. The Iraqi driver who picked me up in Amman could not be persuaded that Israel doesn't aspire to occupy all the land from the Mediterranean to the Euphrates. Conspiracy theories and incongruous rumors about Mossad agents abound. The Jews are commonly blamed — as working parallel to, but not with, Iranian, Syrian, and Saudi terrorists — for the grim wave of suicide bombings that have aroused feelings of dread among Iraqis that, for the most part, exceeded anything they knew under Saddam. Otherwise thoughtful and likeable people, injected with state-sponsored media expressions of antisemitism with booster shots from Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, become volatile merely at the mention of the word "Israel." After one conversation with a group of artists, Wada, who plainly shared their views, took me aside and suggested that I not use it. You don't know these people, he said. Some journalist friends later told me rather to say "Sweden" or "Dixie" when referring to Israel. And, lest anyone confuse hatred of Israel with hatred of Jews, one cleric clarified the position with a religious decree to kill any Jew trying to buy property in Iraq. Although other Jews had recently come and explored the significant Jewish sites, the deteriorating security had soured even the once-hopeful. And so, exercising a degree of caution, I decided Babylon would be my only specifically Jewish visit.

My first obstacle turned out to be the Polish army.

You might want to phone ahead, someone had suggested the day before. The ruins are surrounded by a military base. They might not let you in. Wada waved dismissively. He'd had a long career as a Ba'ath party member in Saddam's foreign ministry, and he knew his way around. Anyway, no one knew which Coalition country was in charge of the base, and even if someone did, it wasn't as if we could call directory assistance for some unknown officer's satellite phone number.

The Poles controlled traffic in and out. Why didn't you call before you came? a young officer asked.

Are you kidding?

You could have emailed. He scribbled down a dot-com for me to try next time.

But I was 50 bucks into the driver, plus Wada's *per diem*, and it didn't seem terribly likely that I'd happen to be passing through south-central Iraq some time in the near future. A sign pointed to the historical ruins.

My grandparents were born in Warsaw, I told him. In truth, it was my great-grandparents. Poland had, in a way, been their Babylonia.

The officer you need to speak to isn't here. Maybe he will come back in ten minutes.

Or maybe not. The sun whipped up a glare, and passing cars trailed fumes and dust. Gunshots rang out from a practice range, and helicopters beat the still air overhead. Every twenty minutes, I'd ask again and some soldier would shrug. I maintained a polite façade while nursing bitterness toward the Polish authorities, who, let's be honest, hadn't done my forebears any real favors, either.

We entered an open-air market alongside the base. Vendors descended, offering counterfeit Saddam wrist-

watches, stamps, and Iraqi national soccer jerseys. Wada negotiated for me, as my skin pinked in the sun. Some American soldiers arrived to bargain for cold Pepsis.

Hey, where y'all from? I asked.

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

No kidding! My mother was born in Allentown. Hey, would you mind giving me a ride up to the ruins?

So there I was, ready at last to enter the seat of Mesopotamia, to see the Lion of Babylon, the legendary sites of the Hanging Gardens and the Tower of Babel, and the courtyards where the prophet Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's tormenting dreams, endured a night in a lions' den, and became the governor — an odd political success story if ever there was one.

There were loose digs, gathered artifacts, a museum.

Wada said he'd wait out on the road with the driver. It pained him that the ancient site had been taken over by foreign invaders — another bilious insult in a year that had been full of them. You go in, he said. Is half-an-hour enough?

Past the Poles, the base spread in all directions. On a hill in the distance stands one of Saddam's many gauche palaces, which, like most of the others, is now used by Coalition forces. Below the palace are the ruins, which you enter through a courtyard where a troupe of guides wait for visitors. Generally, it's not the best of times for Iraqi tourism, but with all the multinational soldiers, the guides have business. Mine was Hadi, a bespectacled archeologist who had done his own excavations in the area and whose English was almost as incomprehensible as the ancient clay tablets with wedge-shaped writing scattered all over the site.

The Gate of Ishtar! he announced. The gate is a 1980s-replica. The real one is in Berlin, Germany, but then, much of the place looks pretty Disney, only with real mice. Tall, yellow-brick walls frame each of the rebuilt sections, and arched doorways opened onto freshly paved alleys and empty, echoing courtyards.

It was Saddam's idea to rebuild the ruins; deaf to the howls of UNESCO and archeologists, in 1987, he committed \$100 million to the project. The ancient bricks bore the inscription, *I am Nebuchadnezzar II, the son of Nabopolassar. The god Marduk [Babylon's most revered god] ordered me to build this palace for his excellency.* The new bricks say, *Rebuilt in the age of Saddam Hussein, the leader of Iraq, the protector of civilizations, the descendant of Nebuchadnezzar.* Saddam's effort to link himself with Nebuchadnezzar was more propagandistic than delusional: the latter ruled a 1,000-mile empire that stretched all the way to the Mediterranean. And he had, of course, "liberated" Jerusalem from the Jews, a message that Saddam's Arab audience, which tends to have a fresh memory of ancient history, would easily understand.

Even apart from Saddam's intrusion, however, anyone who arrives at the ruins now is several millennia too late. The details of life in Babylon, preserved in the records of the wedge-shaped symbols of the area's ubiquitous clay tablets, portray a fantastically advanced society, with as many as a million Aramaic-speaking citizens in a thriving metropolis of unfettered capitalism where birth conferred

status, and life, at least at the high end, was quite splendid. There were zoos and pleasure gardens, including the legendary Hanging Gardens, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world that, according to one legend, Nebuchadnezzar had built for his wife, a Medean who missed the greenery and mountains of her homeland.

According to the Greeks, the Gardens were irrigated by water lifted up from the Euphrates. Such technological prowess would not have been unusual, and some discoveries and inventions are still with us, including longitude and latitude, the 60-second-minute, and the 60-minute-hour. The Babylonians were doing calculus in 1800 BCE; it took Europe another 35 centuries to catch on during the Renaissance.

They constructed immense towers as platforms for their temples. The greatest of these ziggurats was a 300-foot structure called Etemenanki, the foundation of heaven and earth. Although there's little archeological evidence — the place marked as the actual site is just a pit in the ground — some researchers suppose that this was the structure that the bedazzled and comparatively primitive Jews called the Tower of Babel.

For the captives who were brought here from Jerusalem, it must have been like going from Des Moines to New York City, says Erle Leichty, curator emeritus of the Babylonian section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archeology and Anthropology. Jerusalem was like a small country town, and they'd come to the world's metropolis.

It was hardly coincidental that the Jews wrote the Babylonian Talmud here. Babylonian legal codes started in 2100 BCE. Three centuries later, Babylon's sixth king, Hammurabi, updated the system with a catalog of 282 codes that were comparatively enlightened. Women could own property; slaves could buy their own freedom. (Some Jews were slaves; many more owned slaves themselves.)

As they flourished in Babylonia, Jewish religious learning and observance ebbed and flowed. To stop the ebb, the religious learning and observance ebbed and flowed. To stop the ebb, the Jews established great academies devoted to explicating the Bible's meaning and its application to daily life, and the vigorous discussions ultimately led to the great compilation, a 70-year-long project that ended in 470 CE.

The Jewish presence in Babylon continued until the 10th century, as Baghdad became the regional center under the Islamic Caliphate. As *djimmis*, or non-Muslims with protected status, the Jews suffered periodic spasms of persecution and were subject to additional taxes and the humiliations of second-class citizens. Nevertheless, they thrived as traders and merchants and later as professionals and business people. ■

Hadi and I walked down the reconstructed Procession Walk and then wandered through arches to the Lion of Babylon, a 2,600-year-old granite sculpture of a man pinned under a beast. We were joined by a pair of Nicaraguan women sent here for humanitarian assistance. They wore fatigues, which in Iraq is rather like a bull's-eye, but were not allowed to carry arms. They also spoke only Spanish, so I translated Hadi's unintelligible

English, and they squinted at me as I'm sure I was frequently squinting at Hadi. Finally, they relieved the strain and graciously left, and Hadi and I shuffled over dust and stones into a slippery pit that was the ruins of Nebuchadnezzar's central palace. Hadi, who had excavated this particular spot himself, noted that with a worker assigned to every meter, the entire palace was built in just two weeks.

With my half-hour already stretched to an hour, it was good to know I wasn't the first person to come through in a hurry. Hadi insisted that we run through the museum and got a key to open it up, but there was no electricity, the inner rooms didn't have windows, and in the darkness I could only guess at what artifacts he was trying to point out. This is a replica, he called from the shadows. The original is in some place called the University of Pennsylvania.

Back out the *faux* Ishtar Gate, I walked the tarred road, until some soldiers in a Humvee picked me up

and took me back to the entrance, where the same Poles opened the gate of concertina wire to let me out. Wada was waiting at the same place where I'd left him, only now with one of the artists I'd met at the gallery in Baghdad.

We drove to a ziggurat observed by Muslims as the site where the prophet Abraham smashed the idols, the world's first-declared act of monotheism. That the same story is recounted by Jews in Midrash *B'reishit Rabbah* 38:13, and by Muslims in *Soorat al-Anbiya* 21:51-70, underscores the extent to which they draw from the same mythological well.

We climbed up for a view of the vast, unrelentingly flat landscape.

Later, I gave Wada the fifty bucks to pay the driver, and in December, in Baghdad, some contemporary Ali Baba stole his car. •
