

The Second Fall of Babylon. Felicity Arbuthnot

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"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down we hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof." (Psalms 137:1)

It must have been an article I wrote recently, "Erasing History" about Iraq's splendours: I dreamt I was in Babylon again, now destroyed by the Polish and US troops. In my dream, I stood amongst the carnage, with only memories of how it was. I awoke with my head on a tear soaked pillow. Another unique wickedness wrought in the name of two professed, profoundly "Christian" leaders, the "we pray together" Bush and Blair, by degenerate "Christian soldiers", US and Polish.

Babylon, of course, figures prominently in the Bible and its Hanging Gardens were one the of seven wonders of the ancient world. By 1792 B.C., it became the capital of the famous king, lawmaker and social reformer Hammurabi. It flourished under King Nebuchadnezzar (605-563 B.C.) who expanded and rebuilt to make it the largest and loveliest city of its time. Alexander the Great made Babylon his Capital, returning to die there in 322 B.C. The remains of the original Street of Processions had survived the millennia, but not the new crusaders.

The Lion of Babylon, symbol of the goddess Ishtar, had stood by the remains of the Main Palace since time immemorial. The ornate symbols on the back are believed to represent the belief that Ishtar would return, to stand on its back. A photograph last year showed it moved to the modern reconstructed auditorium. Only a heavy crane could have rearranged this poignant historic symbol – and only the US and Polish troops were living there. There appeared to be further damage (legend is that the last was caused by the Ottomans who believed it contained gold.)

Nebuchadnezzar's southern palace is made up of five courtyards, each surrounded by halls and chambers, one of which is a throne room, the remains of the Hanging Gardens were here, still visible. (1)

The squatting soldiers did a bit of construction of their own, reportedly a helipad. Could these ancient wonders withstand such vibration? What of the myriad remains which lie throughout this wondrous place? Buried under a helipad and also gathered, reportedly, to fill sand bags. Tanks roamed this Biblical site, shaking and shuddering ancient and sacred structures. Tanks which destroy modern highways in hours, Babylon's great temples reverberating. "Sacrilege", does not even approach the enormity of this war crime.

"How many miles to Babylon? Three score and ten. Can I get there by candle-light? Yes and back again", goes the children's nursery rhyme; "I was a king in Babylon and you were a Christian slave", wrote W.E. Henley (1849-1903.) Babylon has resonated wonder for four millennia.

"How many ... realise that our superstitious impulse to turn our back when a black cat crosses our path stems from ... Babylon? Do they come to mind when we look at the twelve divisions of our watch face ... when we look up at the stars to read our fate in their movement and conjunction?" Thus wrote Leonard Woolley, archeologist, who conducted extensive excavations during the 1930's. (2) Babylonians produced "... the principles on which harps were turned, the basis of astronomy". Further: "No one concerned with the origins of Western civilisation can afford to ignore its roots ... the visible splendour of proud Babylon and mighty Nineveh ... linked with the very start of recorded history. This, their legacy, is unassailable, their renown indelible: legendary, glorious, immortal." (3)

During the embargo years, returning from the horrors of Basra's hospitals towards Baghdad, Abu Ziad, beloved friend, mentor, driver, would say as we approached the turning, off the main highway: "Babylon, Madam Felicity?" It was always the soul's balm. The Ishtar Gate, entrance to a place of beauty and tranquillity - and a symbol of continuity in a world which, via the UN, had shown Iraqis cruelty beyond measure - their children dying through lack of medication and medical equipment at an average of six thousand a month.

I would carry the children I had held, watched die, or who would die, in my heart and take them and stroke the lion, the enduring symbol, for Iraqis, of resurgence, resurrection: "The Lion of Babylon will rise again ..." is an Iraqi legend of regeneration.

The custodian of the site was an archaeologist in his thirties. He lived and breathed it, loving it as a living thing. During the embargo and the ongoing US/UK bombings, the wonders of the museum there - and those throughout Iraq - were removed to secret vaults for safety. But on every visit, he would solemnly take me around the museum, to the cases which had contained these ancient marvels and explain their significance as if he was still looking at them. "This is from the Akkadian era, excavated in ... the colouring is significant because ... this piece of it is missing, but we still hope - Insh'a'Allah - to find it one day."

On one visit, I discovered a magnificent chamber with a large dais. What was its significance? It was, he said, the Queen's chamber, where she had been able to dispense favours, entertain, meet out punishment. Additional to the ongoing images of the small doomed in my head, it had been a bad day of another kind. I had bought Abu Ziad and the interpreter lunch, in a kebab house they particularly favoured, in an ancient street off the

central market. We found a table outside and the mounds of freshly made, piping hot bread arrived, the kebabs, the hummous and an array of dishes. The interpreter, a highly educated engineer, unable to follow his profession because of the embargo's denial of just about all materials, suddenly excused himself and took his food inside the restaurant. Eating together is an Arab must, meals are the highlight of social interaction.

I got up and looked through the restaurant window. This gentle, immaculate man was stuffing the food in to his mouth with his hands, as if he had not eaten for weeks. When he emerged, I offered more. It took three repeat meals for both of them, before we left. A kilo of meat or chicken cost the equivalent of a month's salary for a university Professor at the time. Madeleine Albright who thought that the deaths of half a million Iraqi children were "a hard choice, but the price, we think the price is worth it", was still U.S. Ambassador to the U.N.

I looked at the dais and something snapped. I leapt on to it and delivered a twenty minute valedictory, in the great, echoing, empty chamber, to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, the US and British Administrations – and to an imaginary Madeleine Albright standing in front of me. Then I "sentenced" her "to death". (Figuratively, of course.) Abu Ziad and the interpreter laughed all the way back to Baghdad.

There was a little souvenir shop at the entrance, with exquisite, lovingly crafted replicas of ancient finds. It has been burned down. On the last visit before the invasion, the peace was total. It was a Friday afternoon, the Sabbath. Families had simple picnics – bread, hummous, tabouleh – children played where "the rivers" and "willows" had been and among the pre-antiquity magnificence, as the sun fell and golden shadows crept along, illuminating the creations of the inspired.

The archaeologist had a recurring plea: to the Germans to return the original Ishtar Gate, which was removed to the Berlin Museum in the 1920's and other Items from this place of wonder – and for the British to do the same. Now it may be that they are all that remain totally intact.

The destroyed irreplaceable is just that, but the spirit of Babylon and Mesopotamia was captured remarkably by Hussein Al Alak, founder of the Iraq Solidarity Campaign, who wrote after the destruction of Samarra's golden mosque, in February 2006: "With the destruction of the Mosque of Samarra, at the front of my mind, along with the great disasters that have faced Iraq and all the Iraqi people, it is said that out of the ashes, the Lion of Babylon will rise again. It will rise from the rubble of its ancient Kingdom and glance over the ruins of the land between two rivers. Each second will encompass its own recollection of betrayal and tragedies. It will recall all influences that made Mesopotamia great and will unleash a mighty roar, that will not alone send shivers throughout the land of my father, but indeed the lands of the world over." (4)

And perhaps the harps and from the Lion's world, the mystical Lyre of Ur, will be heard again at the magnificent Babylon music festival.

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Notes

(1) References: Iraq Guide : Iraq State Organisation for Tourism, 1982.

(2) Iraq: The Bradt Travel Guide, Karen Dabrowska, 2002.

(3) The Legacy of Mesopotamia, Edited by Stephanie Dalley, concluding chapter by Henrietta McCall, quoted by Dabrowska, as above.

(4) "The Lion's Roar is Yet to be Heard."

Featured image: George W. Bush declares victory in Iraq War, USS Abraham Lincoln, San Diego, May 1, 2003

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