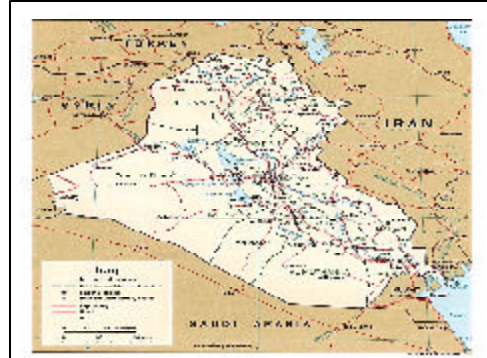


## Country Spotlight:

# Iraq - Ancient Troubled Land

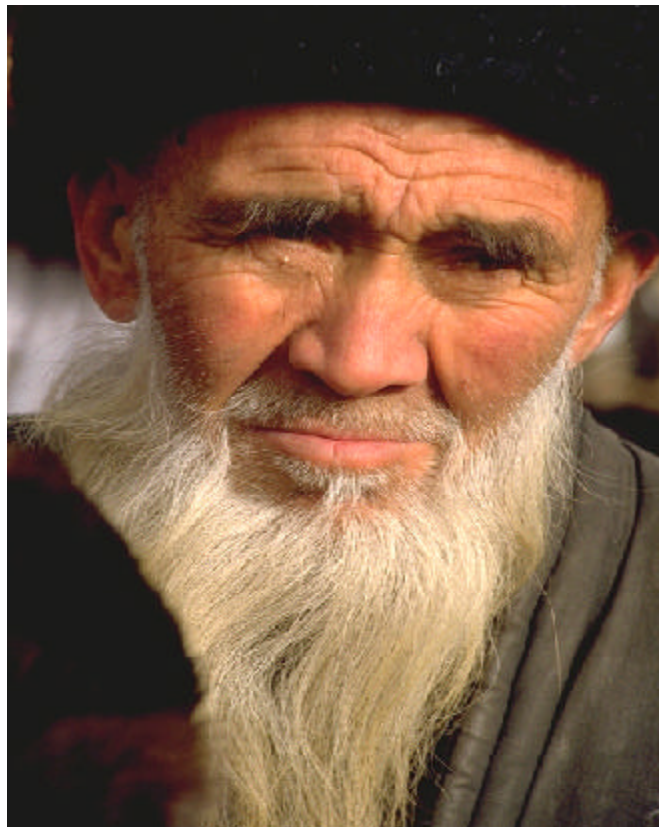


**Population: 24.1 million**  
**Capital: Baghdad**  
**Ethnic Groups: 42**  
**Religion: Islam 97%**  
**All Christians: 1.5%**

*In each newsletter we plan to profile a different country that is part of the BTJ vision. In this issue we put the spotlight on Iraq.*

Iraq has been in the news for all the wrong reasons in recent years - it has become known as a land of bloodshed and suffering. Saddam Hussein may now be dethroned from power, but the spiritual strongholds that have controlled this ancient land of Babylon for thousands of years remain intact.

Many Christians do not realize that the history of Iraq goes back as far as human history itself. In Genesis chapter two we read that the Garden of Eden was positioned at the headwaters of four rivers: the Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates. Although Bible scholars are not all in complete agreement, many believe from this description that the Garden of Eden was somewhere in today's southern Iraq.



When Jonah was instructed by God to go and preach repentance to the city of Nineveh, did you know that he was told to go to a place in today's Iraq? The Ninevite capital was founded about 280 miles north of Baghdad, on the banks of the Tigris River, just across from the present city of Mosul

where some of the fiercest battles of the present conflict have taken place. This makes an interesting historical point. Jonah must have traveled a long distance before he reached Nineveh, although the length of his journey was probably nothing after the dramatic start to his journey inside

the belly of a large fish!

The Jews were exiled to Babylon in 586 BC, leading to the events recorded in the Books of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon ruled from what is now Iraq. Saddam Hussein saw himself as a modern-day Nebuchadnezzar, erecting statues and buildings proclaiming this as fact.

The Church in Iraq dates back to the apostolic times, not long after Jesus' ascension into heaven. In many churches in Iraq today, the Assyrian liturgies given are in the same ancient Aramaic dialect spoken by Jesus and his disciples.

God desires for Iraq to be truly changed into his image and likeness, a land where peace and righteousness reign. This can never be achieved through military action, but only occurs when the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is accepted into the hearts of people, who then choose to daily submit to

In China the revival that has blessed our nation over the past 30 years has largely occurred in rural areas of the country, like Henan, Anhui and Shanxi provinces. Some presumed the house churches would never be able to spread the revival to the modern cities, whose residents were considered too sophisticated to receive an evangelist from a farming area.

We were very aware of this challenge, so in recent years there has been a much greater emphasis on ministry into cities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenyang, Chengdu and many others.

After much prayer, we believe God gave a strategy of how to reach the cities for him. Firstly, we changed some exterior things, such as the way we dressed, so that we would not stand out in the cities. Many of our workers have gained qualifications in different occupations so that they may be able to reach certain social groups better. Like the Apostle Paul, we desired to “become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.” (1 Corinthians 9:22-23).

As one example, a house church group in southern Henan Province was burdened for the

salvation of one city in China. They prayed to the Lord with many tears, asking for a strategy to get into that city and be effective witnesses for him. They found out that there was a shortage of school teachers there, so more than a dozen believers (all from farming backgrounds) studied for teaching degrees. They have now been serving the Lord as teachers for several years. Although they can't share their faith inside the classroom, there have been numerous opportunities outside school hours, and literally hundreds of people, both students and fellow teachers, have found the Lord Jesus through their ministry.

In other cities the house churches have grown tremendously in the past four or five years. Sometimes the believers from rural areas came into a city and decided to focus their attention on training existing local believers, so that they can then go out and share the gospel. This has led to thousands of new believers in each of the major cities in China.

Today in many cities across China some of the most influential people and businessmen are kneeling before the King of Kings, confessing their total dependence on him. God is on the move today, and he has not despised our efforts to take the gospel to the urban areas of our nation.

Now we have come to the time when many house church workers feel a great burden for the Chinese Church to rise up and take the gospel into surrounding nations as

missionaries. Certainly this is our greatest challenge yet, but we are not looking to our own strength to achieve this, as that would be complete stupidity. We are looking to the Lord and His strength, timing and strategy.

Many have already spent years being trained in foreign languages. They are now graduating and are fluent. We know of a number of rural house church workers who have gone to university to receive training in nursing, business administration, and other skills just so they can be more effective for the Lord Jesus in foreign lands.

Others are presently receiving extensive cross-cultural training, and then practicing it by going as workers to minority groups inside China such as the Tibetan Buddhists and the Uygur Muslims. Some have come back with great testimonies of seeing God save people, others have come back disappointed. But it is all a learning process and we are advancing.

Also, don't forget that the majority of people living in the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia are not executives, they are rural people just like us, who earn their livelihood through the work of their hands.

Who knows, in God's plan perhaps there is still a place for us “simple farmers.” I would like to conclude with the following passage. Please read it through carefully,

for it holds promise for all simple people who are called by God and who realize they can do nothing apart from Him. That should be all of us.

*“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? .... Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

1 Corinthians 1:18-20, 26-31



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His lordship. James had this to say about the cause of war and disputes, "What causes fights and quarrels among you?



Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You want something but don't get it. You kill and covet, but you cannot have what you want. You quarrel and fight. You do not have, because you do not ask God" (James 4:1-3).

Only when Iraqis have peace inside their hearts will there will be peace outside. When that takes place, the violence that has ruled this land for countless centuries will have no choice but to bow its knee to the Lord Jesus.

The previous Iraqi regime officially acknowledged 14 different Christian denominations. The largest one in both size and influence is the

Chaldean Catholic Church. Others include the Assyrian Church of the East, Syrian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox and Catholic, Coptic, Seventh-day Adventists, and the National Evangelical Protestants. No new churches had been allowed to register since 1981.

Although Iraq's Christians account for less than three percent of the country's population, this figure still represents a larger Christian presence than almost any other country in the Islamic world.

The Kurds in the north of the country are perhaps the least responsive of any of Iraq's people groups, even though they have probably received more evangelical witness since the first Gulf War than any other group in Iraq.

Thousands of Chinese Christians have been watching televi-

sion images of the fighting and mayhem in Iraq. Many fervent prayers have gone up for the salvation of this ancient land. In the past few months a small group of house church Christians from China visited Iraq.

seeking for opportunities for future BTJ workers to come and minister there. Will you join with us in praying for Iraq? Its only hope is for the Lord Jesus Christ to come into the hearts of millions of people, giving them the inward peace they must have before they will ever be able to bring outward peace to their society.

**Pray the gospel of Jesus Christ would go out in Iraq with great power and authority, transforming lives and communities for God.**

**Pray for the existing mission groups that are trying to reach Iraq through various activities and ministry. Ask God to bless and empower their work, that the Iraqi people may see the truth of Jesus Christ.**

**Ask God to give wisdom and direction to the Chinese Church, as we seek to reach out into Iraq.**

**Pray all true Iraqi believers in Jesus would be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to boldly preach the Gospel, even to the point of death.**

**Fervently ask the Lord to transform Iraq as He has done in many parts of China. Pray that Iraqi children would grow up worshipping Jesus and praising the Lamb of God.**

