

# International Teaching Ministry of Douglas Jacoby

## International Bible Teaching Ministry Update



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IRAQ

"Challenging men and women of faith to think"

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Dear Friends,

Much has happened since the last newsletter (22 March) when we announced the new book, *Jesus and Islam*. My next work is *Why Believe in God?* The completed manuscript is due to Harvest House on 1 August. A new DVD set on Baptism has been produced. I've also been teaching in Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, on topics like Church History, Old Testament, and Leadership. (More details in future newsletters.)

Today's issue is focused on women's teaching ministry. In addition, a few important reminders will be found at the end of the bulletin. They pertain to Rome, the Prejudice seminar, and the podcasts. (Please don't skip them!)

A few weeks ago the Board of IBTM (the International Bible Teaching Ministry) decided to send Marie Sarah to Iraq. She was asked to teach young women about culture-specific and conflict-specific issues related to discipleship. Her lessons covered such difficult topics as facing the pressure to marry, the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder on discipleship, and using the Bible in dealing with fear of abandonment.

Iraq has been devastated by a series of wars in recent decades. Many believers have ambivalent

feelings towards the Iraqis. Yet for true Christians there are no enemies. Our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20), not in this world. Some Iraqis are spiritual brothers and sisters. Others, most of whom are Muslim, are *potential* fellow believers. The Lord spoke loud and clear about love for outsiders (Matthew 5:38-48). With this in mind, let us pray for the spread of the gospel globally (2 Thessalonians 3:1), and especially for the people of Iraq! Marie, in my opinion, exemplifies this spirit. She is an able teacher and a woman of faith. And it is an honor to be friends with her and her husband, Aziz.

Marie used to live in Israel, speaks Arabic, and has learned a great deal in the area of mental health. She is currently a member of a church of Christ in Northern Virginia. This is her story.



*Marie in Iraq. She plans to begin doctoral studies in the near future.  
More pix in photo gallery of main website.*

## **TEACHING FEMALE BELIEVERS IN IRAQ**

**by Marie Sarah**

### **Assyrian Empire**

The rocky hills of Northern Iraq are an unexplored frontier for most American Christians. Many of us know Iraq only as the war-torn country featured in countless news reports and military briefings. But the Bible assigns special significance to the lush valleys and weathered mountains of Northern Iraq. These ancient lands were the home of the Assyrian Empire, infamous for conquering the Northern Kingdom of Israel and leading the Israelites into captivity. The Assyrians are also renowned in the Old Testament as the people to whom Jonah preached at Nineveh (modern Mosul).

Today, the American Christian who is called to Iraq might have a response similar to that of the Biblical prophet. As many Americans are now leaving this country, they are quickly being replaced in Northern Iraq by foreign investors, businessmen, missionaries, aid workers, and teachers. I was honored to be one of those teachers called to fill the vacuum left by conflict and the departure of troops, and this is a record of my experience.

### **The call**

When I first received the call, learning of the opportunity to teach at a conference in Iraq, it struck a chord with me. As an American married to a Middle Easterner, I have long felt the desire to bridge the gap between Americans and this often misunderstood region. I have lived, worked and traveled in the Middle East and in conflict zones, and I am blessed to know enough Arabic to communicate freely. But most of all, I have a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19). For me, the chance to visit Iraq was not just a chance to visit another country; it was an opportunity to connect with people just like you and me, struggling to find meaning in chaos. So in March I boarded a plane to Istanbul (with my husband's blessing), and prepared to enter a land plagued by division.

### **In the dead of night**

At Ataturk Airport in Istanbul I met with a small group of American Bible teachers also headed to the conference. There is one flight a day to Northern Iraq from Turkey, and it is a two-hour trip undertaken in the dead of night. We shared the flight with a few European and Japanese businessmen and a planeload of Kurdish refugees. Throughout the flight, Kurdish passengers enthusiastically gave me lessons in Sorani Kurdish, urging me to listen to their favorite Kurdish pop music.

The plane had a rough landing in Arbil, Iraq at 3 am, at an airport covered in dust from a sandstorm. No visa was required— the Iraqi border official barely glanced at me before welcoming me to the country.

### **The other Iraq**

I had entered Northern Iraq, often called “the other Iraq.” This area is governed by the Kurdish Regional Authority, and has a deeply divided population of Kurds and Arabs. Kurds love Americans for “liberating” the country, while many of the Arabs are refugees, hailing from cities like Baghdad and Mosul. The Kurds are enjoying a high point in their collective history as business booms and greater Iraq are represented by a Kurdish president, Jalal Talabani. The Arabs, on the other hand, are fearful and nostalgic for the time when Baghdad was beautiful, when they could relax by the river in the shade of the palm trees. They complain that Northern Iraq is too “country,” that it has no night life, and is not modern enough.

### **The mood was electric**

Our group of teachers was ushered to a hotel in the mountains, and we settled into our rooms just after 5 am. Some volunteers might have been tempted by second thoughts then— the ceiling was deteriorating, and chunks of plaster broke off and fell to the ground whenever the

humidity rose. The power was unreliable and frequently left us in the dark (especially whenever I started to work on my lesson plans), and the spring rains had made everything cold and damp. However, when the conference began the following day, the mood was electric.

### **Opening doors in closed countries**

The conference had been organized by a small Bible college which educates local Christian leaders. The hosting organization had discovered that meeting the need for education provides legitimacy and opens doors in otherwise closed countries, so the conference was structured as biblical education and leadership sessions. Most of the locals were attending from the neighboring cities of Arbil and Sulaymaniya, two major cities with a large pool of potentially open hearts. The ancient Assyrian capital of Arbil is a booming industrial center with upwards of 1.1 million citizens, and Sulaymaniya has more modern origins, boasting a population of over 1.7 million.

### **Mistrust on both sides**

In order to appeal to a diverse audience, the teaching theme was “family issues,” and when the attendees arrived around noon we saw that the aim of diversity had succeeded. There were indigenous Iraqi Christians from the Assyrian and Chaldean churches of the East, while other groups were from Muslim or Yazidi backgrounds. (In Northern Iraq as a whole, Islam is the preeminent religion.) However, these were reluctant adherents; they enjoyed alcohol, and seemed to be on the lookout for an alternative. Part of the problem, I learned, was ethnic. Iraq’s Arab Muslims had oppressed, marginalized, and even massacred the Kurdish Muslims, and after the American invasion, Kurdish fighters had carried out retaliatory ethnic cleansing against Arab civilians. There were plenty of reasons for mistrust on both sides, and the time was right for a message of reconciliation.

As the conference began, my work became clear. The Arab and Kurdish groups sat in separate sections for translation. A few of the volunteers knew Kurdish and sat with the Kurdish group. However, none of the other volunteers or Bible college employees spoke Arabic. I began trying to bridge the divide between the Arabs and the rest of the group. Some families had been displaced from their homes as recently as three weeks before the conference, and all of them looked uneasy in their new environment.

### **From tentative smiles to hysterical laughter**

I started by sitting at the edge of the group. Introducing myself, I talked about my Arab husband and my life in Jerusalem. Soon, there were tentative smiles and questions about Palestine. After a few ice-breaking activities, they invited me to sit in the middle of the group. Group discussions were next on the conference agenda. I facilitated a discussion on the story of the “Good Samaritan.” I thought the story an appropriate choice for drawing out how God can transform enemies to become friends for His glory. At the end of the discussion we reenacted the parable, and I played the neutral role of the *moondirat al-foonduq*, or the “innkeeper.” When our “Good Samaritan” brought the injured man to the inn, I mimicked a classic Middle Eastern market scene, arguing and bargaining with them until I got my two silver coins. Arabs are dramatic, and their reenactment drew hysterical laughter from everyone.

### **They kissed me on both cheeks**

By now I was part of the group. Whenever I arrived for classes, they kissed me on both cheeks and invited me to sing with them (I knew some Arabic songs). In the following days, they really began to open up. In one discussion I led on joy and suffering, the women told me about life along the River [the Euphrates], and escaping Baghdad during the war. I listened to stories of how families fled Mosul, and watched as they described their new homes in the refugee camp. They recalled their failed engagements and conflicts with mother-in-laws, while others told stories of tragic miscarriages and joyful deliveries. It was a colorful group of women, with familiar hopes and dreams.

### **Each woman was in a different place**

The next day I taught a session on the importance of the Bible. I began by asking them about their convictions, and found that each woman was in a different place. One explained how her family was angry when she refused to baptize her baby. "I want him to make the decision for himself when he is a teenager," she said. When I asked her the reason for her belief, she replied that she had learned from studying the Bible at the Bible college. Another girl matter-of-factly explained that she was Assyrian Christian, and her family had always been faithful—she didn't need anything else. One woman was Muslim. She revealed that she was attending the conference because her husband had converted at Bible college. She had beaten him, but when he had refused to stop coming she decided to come with him to hear some of the classes on raising children.

### **Instilling confidence in the Word**

Next, I shared verses like Psalm 18:30 and 2 Timothy 3:16. Instilling confidence in the Word is foundational in short-term missions: people need somewhere to turn after volunteers depart. In Iraq, most Christian sects do not believe the Bible is inspired or reliable, and Muslims believe the Bible has been changed. Combine this with the effects of living in a conflict zone, and it is hardly surprising that traumatized individuals are often reluctant to trust anyone. Thus, my goal in the class was to build a stronger kind of trust—trust in the Bible. It was a simple job for me, as I could refer the group to translations of the Old and New Testaments in Arabic. Across the conference with the Kurdish group, they faced the challenge of only having the New Testament available in Kurdish.

### **Tears came to her eyes**

There were many victories as the conference went on. With each day the Muslim woman's head scarf was slipping further and further back on her head, revealing more of her dark brown hair. Eventually, she took it off. As she sipped tea during a women's meeting, the group began talking about joy. One girl asked, "What is a time this year when you have felt joy?" Tears came to the woman's eyes, and she replied, "I have never felt true joy until I came here—now I know what it feels like." She continued to say that she wanted to learn more about the Bible.

### **"I am going to start reading my Bible"**

When the conference finally drew to a close, it was clear that lives had been changed. Staff

members at the hotel restaurant were approaching conference organizers, asking how to learn more about the scriptures. Among the conference attendees, people who had been struggling were renewed. "You are family now, come again and stay with us, you are always welcome," said one family. Another girl bought two pairs of earrings and gave me one pair, so we would match. "I am going to start reading my Bible," said one of the Arab girls, "I want to know God."

### **A small glimpse of God at work**

We returned to Arbil the next day. There we ended our trip by hiking up the unexcavated mound in the center of the city. Cranes dotted the skyline, as businessmen eagerly invested in reconstruction. On the other side of the hill, workers were putting the finishing touches on a massive bus station and multi-level mall. The entire city was alive with energy and opportunity. Just by climbing the mound, we stood atop four thousand years of history and a treasure trove of archaeology, waiting to be uncovered. As I looked across the city, I knew I had been blessed to witness a small glimpse of God at work. Beneath the surface, He was busy administering His plan for good in a country destroyed by hatred and war. At the same time, I was reminded of Matthew 9:35-38: this was a field that needed workers.

### **Tearing down an invisible wall**

As the little plane pattered back over the mountains on its way out of Iraq, I felt as excited as when I had arrived. By going and coming back I had taken part in the process of tearing down an invisible wall, and more people would follow. I was not the first, and I knew I would not be the last. Prayerfully, I would be able to return someday to continue what had been started, but for the time being God had used me and was sending me back to tell others what I had seen. Meanwhile, He would continue working beneath the surface, making streams in the desert.

I stepped off the plane in Istanbul with a great sense of peace. This was not an end, but a beginning.

### **Deepest thanks**

I would like to extend my deepest thanks to Douglas Jacoby and the International Bible Teaching Ministry for allowing me to undertake this journey. The opportunities for women to teach internationally are rare, and the opportunity to teach in Iraq is even rarer. This support opens doors for Christian women to fulfill God's plan in a powerful way and reach young women around the world.

*If you would like to support further work in Northern Iraq, or if you have questions and would like to pray for the people of Iraq, please contact Marie Sarah at Scheharazade @hotmail.com. (Be sure to first remove the space before the @.)*

### **ASSORTED REMINDERS (please check)**

\* **PODCASTS:** Have you explored the new website? Podcasts uploaded (second website) in 2009 include not only a Response to the Global Financial Crisis, but also: Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Lot, Isaac, Ishmael, Rebekah, Esau, Jacob, Rachel & Leah, Joseph, Moses,

Aaron, Miriam, Balaam, and Phinehas. Next week: Joshua!

\* **PREJUDICE IN THE CHURCH:** Registration is now open for the August seminar on Prejudice in the Church. 10% off for all signing up before July. And churches sending 10+ participants save 50%!

\* **ROME:** Payment for Rome/Pompeii tour is due 1 May. (After this time the amount increases.)

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