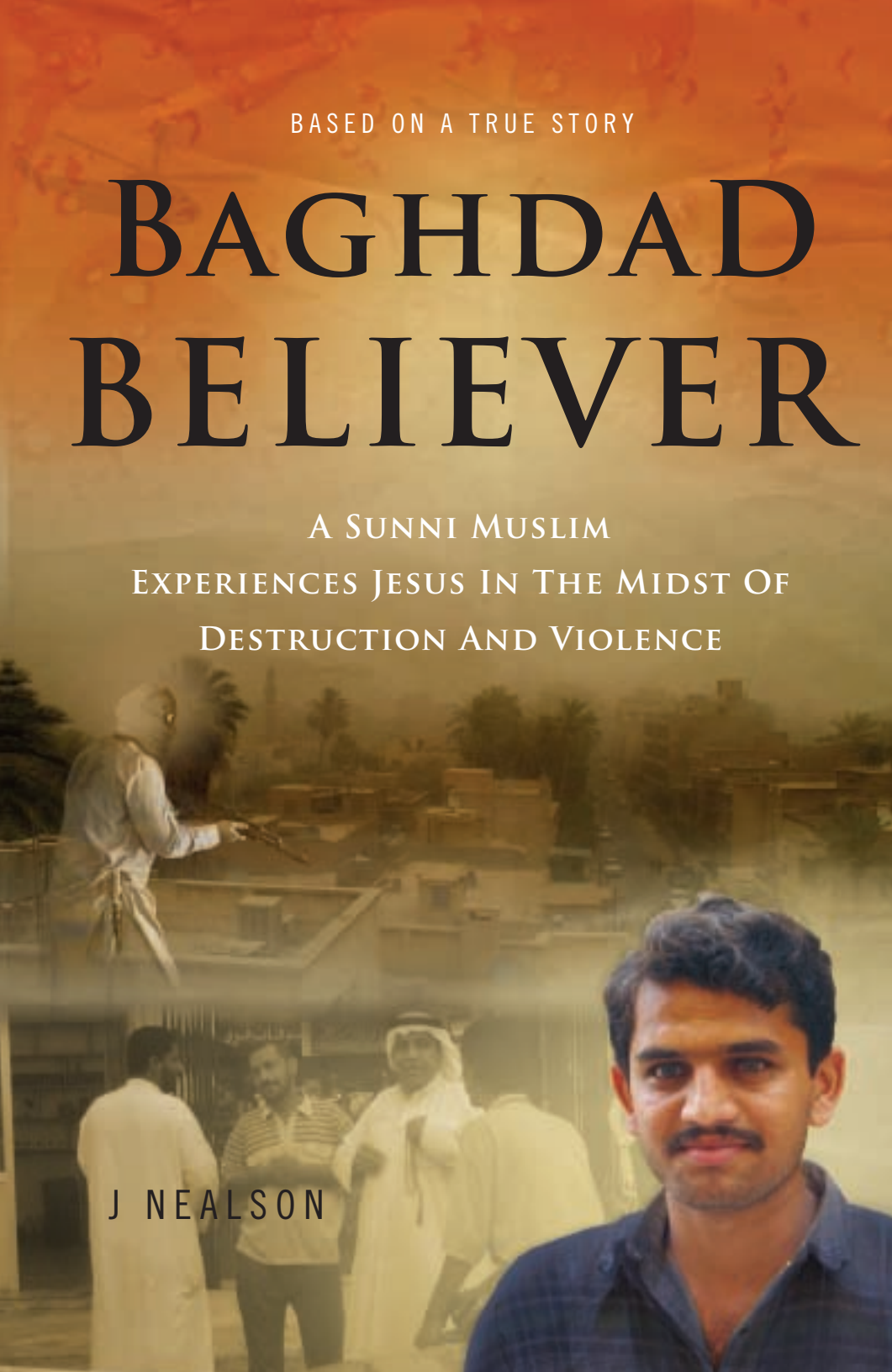


BASED ON A TRUE STORY

BAGHDAD BELIEVER

A SUNNI MUSLIM
EXPERIENCES JESUS IN THE MIDST OF
DESTRUCTION AND VIOLENCE

J NEALSON



Baghdad Believer

A Sunni Muslim experiences Jesus in the midst of destruction and violence

By J. Neelson

Christians who want to befriend and bless Muslims will benefit from these insights into what life is like for members of a Sunni clan

Published by Falco
Production by Mill City Press

Baghdad Believer

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For more information please contact the author at
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Baghdad Believer

Sometimes it is hard to believe that our Muslim friends will ever follow Jesus. If you pray for Muslims, this book will give you faith to persevere. If you are actively befriending Muslims, hoping to see them move toward Jesus, this book will help you imagine what that journey might look like. If you are a Muslim, this book may give you a glimpse into a wonderful way in which our almighty God is at work to accomplish His good purposes in the world today.

This is a hope-filled look at the beauty of Jesus and Iraqi culture. I was challenged again to believe that God will accomplish His purposes among Muslim peoples. Read it and benefit from J. Nealson's decades of experience loving and living among Iraqis.

Shane Bennett
Initiative360

Baghdad Believer

What a different world the culture of Muslims is from the Western way of thinking -- and how important for Christians to understand it! We were told to make disciples, not necessarily “Christians” in the cultural and religious sense. But, what can that look like? Here finally is a book that shows the inside story -- how Muslims feel when they learn to follow Isa. It is deeply encouraging to see that Jesus talks to people in their language and invades their mindset. This book helps greatly to understand this mindset and is therefore crucial for our Christian testimony also in Europe.

Reinhold Scharnowski, Director
DAWN European Network

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be an Iraqi in Baghdad? This book gives an inside view of the thought processes of a Sunni Muslim when he comes in contact with the Bible. It will help those who work with Iraqis and those who pray for peace. It will help Americans understand how a Muslim thinks and how to communicate Truth to them. This book is a must-read for those who are concerned for the over one billion Muslims in the world and the stranger in your midst.

Avery Willis, Executive Director
International Orality Network
<http://www.averywillis.org>

Contents

Foreword	xi
Preface	xiii
Acknowledgments	xv
Chapter 1. A Secret Bible	1
Chapter 2. History that Lives	3
Chapter 3. Fear and Mistrust	10
Chapter 4. Uncle is Taken and Beaten	14
Chapter 5. The Dreams Begin	20
Chapter 6. Fear and Danger	23
Chapter 7. Nightmares and Dreams	27
Chapter 8. An Uncle's Advice	29
Chapter 9. Lives of the Prophets	33
Chapter 10. Accountable to Grow	38
Chapter 11. My Family Demands Answers	46
Chapter 12. I See God	51
Chapter 13. Learning to Live by Faith	58
Chapter 14. Learning to Love by Faith	63
Chapter 15. Family Anger	65
Chapter 16. A Funeral Brings Comfort	68
Chapter 17. Family First	72
Chapter 18. Father Faces the Facts	75
Chapter 19. Family Questions	80
Chapter 20. The Future for Our Family?	83
Chapter 21. Summary of My Experiences	85
Resources for Further Study	I

Foreword

“The Gospel of Jesus Christ is culture permeating. And it is for all people, including Muslims. This book shows what the good news about Isa can sound like when it is not filtered through the prejudice of Western institutions nor encumbered by multiple layers of contested history.

An important resource for cross-cultural missions!”

Timothy George, Dean
Beeson Divinity School
Executive Editor of Christianity Today

Preface

There are more than 5,000 books on the market about Iraq. There have been none written since the 1930s about how God changes lives and makes peace among the Arabs in Iraq. There are more than 90 books on ethnic Christians in Iraq, but none address Arab Iraqi Muslims having personal encounters with Jesus Christ. There are more than 30 books on evangelizing Muslims, but none give case studies of how Baghdadi Muslims actually become peacemakers in the middle of civil war in Iraq.

Baghdad Believer, written as a personal story, is a fictionalized account of how an Iraqi met Jesus -- because of his cultural background, not in spite of it. God has uniquely prepared Iraqis to become peacemakers, and this is the story of how it sometimes happens.

This book addresses many myths and assumptions about Muslims and about how Muslims can follow Jesus while maintaining many of their cultural values.

May this story challenge your own assumptions.

J. Nealson

Acknowledgments

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Iraqis and give their lives to serve.

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Chapter 1

A Secret Bible

I was so bored. I found relief only by reading cheap fiction books passed among the readers at the sport club. Most of my friends would not read, and I even thought that they could not read anything more than the simplest headlines of the newspaper. We seldom discussed much what we read where others could overhear us, but we did talk in private about new ideas of the perfect society. It was unwise to ever say anything that might sound political, so we talked about sports, family events, family honor, meanings of love -- seldom about truth, law, or government, except in a philosophical, abstract way. Life in Baghdad was dangerous enough without adding non-essential words that might be misunderstood.

The gate to my own freedom began opening the evening, not long after the 2003 change of government in Iraq, when I met my mother's cousin Ahmed at a wedding reception for another cousin. Uncle Ahmed, in his usual rumpled brown jacket, had an air of excitement about him that night and a sense of something secret that he wanted to tell me. It was noisy, crowded, and hot in the welcome hall of the family's home. He nodded his head towards the open door to the veranda. I nodded and followed him out, wondering what illegal gossip he wanted to whisper.

He stood next to the large corner planter with the spiny cactus in it and took a sip of his cola. As I came close, he asked about my family, friends, and work. I spoke briefly and stopped, waiting. “Mahmood,” he said, “have you read the Injiil [Bible portion], the book written about the Prophet Isa [Jesus]? I am reading it and find it historical and logical. And, I have found that many Muslims like us follow his teachings. He sends peace inside. I have felt it. It is true.”

“What? But you are a Muslim and an Arab! What will the family think? The Koran is supposed to be the only religious book we read.”

“Mahmood, listen. You read the Koran about as often as you go to the mosque -- maybe once a year? Well, this book is the history of the teachings of the Prophet Isa [Jesus] and of what his followers did and taught. The important thing is to study what he said himself. He is more than just a prophet. Here, take this and read the first section. I must go. God bless you.”

He slipped me a small, green-jacketed book that I hid quickly in the inside pocket of my jacket. I could not believe I had just heard something so frivolous, so out of place. Pieces of the 30-second talk played over and over in my ears during the next two hours as I made small talk with the dozens of guests and the bride, groom, and their parents. It bothered me that such silly babbling would confuse me. I was Muslim, born into a family line where Islam gives guidance to every detail of our culture. Islam was God’s final path for humanity. For us Sunni Muslims it meant exactly that -- the established path that could save us.

Chapter 2

History that Lives

I was surprised that Uncle Ahmed was reading the book about Isa. The Injiil is the revered book of Christian tribes whose members openly eat pork, drink alcohol, and do other things in public that we Muslims only do in secret, if at all. According to our traditions, there is nothing wrong with reading their book. The Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, was supposed to have said that the book was good before the Christians changed it.

We Muslims are allowed to read the book even if it was changed, but I could not understand what Uncle wanted me to do. He was so excited, like the Sufi religious mystics who say they experience God and then speak in strange sounds and act very other-worldly. I respected some of them for their spiritual beliefs but did not think they were very useful people.

The bulge of the book in my jacket pocket rubbed against me every step of the way home, reminding me of my obligation to read some of it before I saw Uncle Ahmed again. I knew that he would ask me what I thought of it. Although I dreaded the questions, I was curious about the book. I tried to think through, too, his motives for including me in this foolishness.

Many organizations competed for power in

Iraq -- organizations such as the Mukhabarat intelligence and security system, the Amn secret police, and the Estikhbarat military intelligence. Other security groups represented the interests of political parties, the ministry of civilian internal affairs, the private military and industry agencies, and the religious right and left parties. The more recent dangers were from the paramilitary groups and militias who ruled different parts of Baghdad under the direction of a mullah or warlord or other power-hungry people.

We in the city knew that in any meeting of three persons, one of them could be an informer to a dangerous organization.

Sometimes, my mother's brother had "visitors" at his office that looked like they were collecting information or pay-offs. They were not necessarily bad, they were just doing their part to protect their families. They would report any suspicious information to someone, who would then report it to someone else. If you were in one of the information chains, you were protected by what you knew. By reporting on anyone who either seemed suspicious or who was a bother to you, you could improve your own family's security while putting down those you did not like. Not everyone was like this, and most people preferred to keep their eyes only on their own business.

On the other hand, it was natural enough for my uncle to include me with whatever he was up to. We often helped each other in our electrical products sales jobs in al-Harithia. I had gone to Baghdad University and graduated with fairly good grades without paying off teachers, except one that required all students to pay an "exit fee" to pass his course. My family expressed pride in me, privately,

that I worked hard for my grades, and our family honor was improved through my academic achievement. My classmates sometimes thought I was dumb to study so hard when it was not necessary. They thought that the only important thing was to get the diploma, and if you could get it with money, why study? A few friends had special connections that could change grades, dismiss teachers, or send too-competitive students straight to the army.

All I knew was the normality of a police state and the chaos that followed, and I mastered the skills of lying and deceiving that every survivor acquired along the road to adulthood. Sometimes it was not enough to have important friends. I had been to the funerals of friends who said something "unpatriotic" and were soon found dead at their family's front door.

Uncle had been careful in what he said to me. Nothing political, nothing inflammatory, except the phrase that the Prophet Isa was more than a prophet. That could mean that he was saying that our traditions that taught the Prophet Isa pointed the way to the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, were incomplete. But, he could explain that away, maybe, if challenged by some investigator.

I thought through all of the family connections and all of Uncle's friends that I knew. I could not think of any who would want to hurt me or get at my family.

On returning home around 1:30 in the morning and seeing my wife Hadija, deep asleep on the sleeper-sofa, I poured myself a drink and sat in the kitchen wondering if I should read any of Uncle's book.

"Why not?" I asked myself.

Pulling the book from my jacket pocket, I started reading at the front cover and continued on, page after page for

about an hour. It was hard to read. The book's small print strained my eyes under the dim fluorescent light on the green ceiling.

Many of the popular books I read used a similar Arabic typeface, but they were usually printed in larger size on thicker paper. This paper was so thin that the printing showed through from the other side of the page, making it hard to read. The cover said simply, "The Sacred Book," and inside the front was the notation, "Translated from the original languages." There was a bit of preface that I skipped and a table of contents. I began reading the first part, "The good news of Matta."

I understood from the introduction that this book was written to the Jews by a Jew named Matta [Matthew]. Here alone was enough information to get me in trouble. In Iraq, the "True Enemy" is Israel. Nebuchadnezzar, the ancient king, was one of our heroes because he made slaves of the entire Jewish nation.

So, why would Uncle give me a book about Jews and tell me it was good news? This did not sound like good news to me. Checking behind me to see if anyone was watching, I read on, through the genealogy of Yeshua [Jesus] the Messiah. I knew that Jews and Christians had different names for our prophets and that our Isa they called Yeshua. I prefer the sound of our "Isa" to that of their word "Yeshua." Isa was a son of Daoud [David], ancient king of the Jews and a descendent of Ibrahim [Abraham], father of the Arab tribes. That was simple history -- nothing threatening -- and I relaxed. In the days of my grandfather, most people could recite their genealogies back many generations, but it was not so important to

people now. Many tried to prove descent from the Prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him.

I noticed Ishaq [Isaac] was mentioned as son of Ibrahim, but not Ishmael. Of course! A Jew wrote this!

The record of geneology mentioned ancestors of Isa who were exiled to Babylon. I wondered if some of them married into our local tribes, and if some of the same bloodline of the Prophet Isa was still in Iraq. There were some Jews living in Baghdad; there used to be thousands of them, but most left long ago for Israel. I knew one old Jew, and he seemed like a nice man, but people did not trust the Jews, and they were harassed a lot.

I read on.

The book said that Maryam [Mary] became pregnant by the Spirit of God. Strange. I bet that was hard to explain to her family! I imagined what it would be like if my sister became pregnant and she said that God did it. Since she was engaged, we would assume that her fiancé did it. We would have them marry quickly and hope that no one counted the months too closely.

If Yusif [Joseph], Maryam's fiancé, said that he did not do it, her family would have had to find who was responsible and extract money from him, enough to cover the shame. Of course, someone would have had to marry her anyway.

I did wonder how in the world Maryam came to say such a thing. Even if it were true, there would be no way to prove it, even though a doctor might claim that she was a virgin. Of course, the doctor could be paid to say anything or paid to keep quiet. Either way, Maryam's family would have been frustrated with Maryam and the shame of the whole thing.

I was glad that the author wrote about Yusif getting his visit from an angel too. That eased the tension between him and Maryam, although both families must have still been angry. I wondered what the book meant by, "Yusif was a righteous man." I could not even think of a single person I knew who was righteous. Everybody I knew had at least some meanness or selfishness -- and that included the Christians. I thought of them. I knew one priest, and he was a good man, but he was not righteous. Certainly, no one who regularly ate pork and drank alcohol could be called righteous.

Like most of my family and friends, whether Muslim or Christian, I enjoyed an occasional beer or whiskey, and I had eaten pork while on holiday in Europe. I wondered if Christians who kept all the Islamic rules were in better favor with God than some of us Muslims who did not keep the rules. These were strange thoughts that my uncle had put into my head.

History does matter, and Uncle used to tell me stories of the glory of ancient Iraq and the days before Islam. Back then, most tribes in Iraq were not Muslim, and many were even Christian in belief.

That changed in the 7th century. Nomadic Arabs with the Sunni Muslim belief systems settled in the towns near the rivers of Iraq and married into Shia families. This added religious conflict to the wars between settled and nomadic tribes. Christians often tried to stay neutral in these battles and were generally left alone as long as they did not get involved in politics. That was why they were still in positions of influence -- they tended to their own business, kept their religion inside their churches, and

could be counted on to not be troublemakers as long as the government protected them from Islamic activists.

Christian or Muslim, I thought, there were no righteous people in all the tribes of Iraq. None.

Chapter 21

Summary of My Experiences

Before I began learning of Isa, I was tired in my life, seeking escape and relief. The good thing was that the frustration opened my mind to new ideas. Here are some of the main points that helped me in my journey.

-My uncle, who is my trusted friend, said that I should ask Isa to show himself to me, and to think over what Isa said about himself. Then he gave me the words of Isa to study. Printed words met my need for thinking about God, while audio words and music touched my emotions.

-I saw that God was working in other families at the same time and worked differently with each person.

-After a wrong start with deceiving my family, I apologized, and then waited for the family head to permit us to discuss God's word as a family, giving us a way to learn together without shame.

In addition, some things help me as I keep learning and trying to follow Isa.

-My mentor (the friend who helped me to learn to be a better follower of Isa) and I asked each other as we met each week:

A: Have you been a good example to the greatness of the Prophet Isa, both in words and in actions?

B: Have you acted with honor in thoughts, words, and actions?

C: Have you been honoring, understanding, and generous in your personal relationships?

D: Did you read the full amount of Injiil that we agreed on this week?

E: What has God shown you that you must do this next week?

-There are many people in my weekly contacts that are open to the things of God; I have learned to spend more time with these who want to learn. I try to be friendly to everyone, but not spend as much time with those who are not seeking good for their family and community.

-I ask God often to show me the difference between truth and culture for my own family.

Resources for Further Study

A. Muslim World

Honor and Shame: Women in Modern Iraq
by Sana Al-Khayat

Shi'ite Islam: A History of Islam in Iran and Irak
by Dwight Donaldson (1933)

Is the Father of Jesus the God of Muhammad?
by Timothy George;
(Comparison of Islam and Christianity)

*The Thousand Year War in the Mideast:
How It Affects You Today*
by Richard Maybury; (Mideast vs. West)

Unseen Face of Islam
by Bill Musk; (Superstition and traditions in Islam)

Abu Sharif
by J.K. Mellis;
(A Moroccan Berber clan meets Jesus)

The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs
by David Pryce-Jones

“Ethnic and Religious Regions of Iraq”
http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/iraq_ethno_2003.jpg

B. Cross-Cultural Ministry

*In Search of the Source:
A First Encounter with God's Word*
by Neil Anderson;
(Bible translation and communication)

Worldwide Perspectives
by Meg Crossman
(Finding Your Role in God's Work)

*Finding Common Ground:
How to Communicate with those Outside the
Christian Community While We Still Can*
by Tim Downs;
(Relating to those outside Christendom)

<http://www.JNealson.com/>
(Collection of ministry resources)

*Foolishness to the Greeks:
The Gospel and Western Culture*
by Lesslie Newbigin;
(Separating culture from truth)

C. Ministry Development

Lives of the Prophets audio stories
<http://www.alanbiya.com/>

Cultivating a Life for God
by Neil Cole
(Finding those seeking God)

Organic Church
by Neil Cole
(From individual believers to body life)

God's Story: From Creation to Eternity
by The God's Story Project (Dorothy Miller),
<http://www.gods-story.org/>
(Chronological Bible video & audio)

Hunger for Reality
by George Verwer;
(Passion must drive everything)

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Baghdad Believer

Generally, the [public] conversation about Iraq centers on the minority who express their political convictions through violence. This misrepresentation of reality is an irresponsible hindrance to our Lord's Kingdom. It also is a disservice to the Iraqi people. People who propagate mistrust and hatred are guilty of breaking our Lord's first and second commands.

The book you are now holding dramatically and responsibly departs from the majority of material Americans and others hear about Iraq. J. Neelson is qualified to tell this story both because of his intimate knowledge of Iraq and his personal relationship with Jesus. He sensitively reports a story of an Iraqi God-seeker from a God-honoring worldview.

You have never before read such a candid account of a Muslim's journey toward God. You feel like you are right there on the streets of Baghdad.

Once you start reading, this book is impossible to put down!

Dr. Gregory E. Fritz, CEO
Initiative360 Take it global
(formerly APMC and Caleb Project)
<http://www.takeitglobal.org>

Baghdad Believer

Reaching Muslims with the love of Christ is likely one of the biggest missionary challenges in our time. The good news is that God's Spirit is already moving in the Middle East and other Islamic regions of the world, and more and more Muslims are finding Isa (Jesus), often through supernatural encounters like dreams and visions, and divine connections.

For years, I have been publishing about what God is doing worldwide, and these stories still excite me most. There is no 'hard ground' for God, no 'closed nations,' and no 'impossibilities.' Often the real strongholds are those of fear, unbelief, and prejudice in our own minds. This inspiring account of an Iraqi man who finds Jesus and starts to follow Him, stirs our faith that God's Kingdom can and will come to the Muslim world in unexpected ways.

May this book ignite a new passion in your heart for Jesus and his Kingdom.

Marc van der Woude
<http://www.joelnews.org>

Baghdad Believer

Baghdad Believer is very enjoyable and an easy read. The author's use of the Gospels (particularly Matthew) as the backbone to guide the narrative is unique and added interest. The use of Arabicized Bible words is helpful in understanding Christianity through the filter of a Sunni Muslim. The overlay of being in Baghdad is fresh and insightful -- certainly probing beyond what most receive from Western media.

This book will instantly have two purposes:

First, informing a Christian what it is like to be a Muslim who encounters the truth of Jesus for the first time, and secondly, as a thought-provoking evangelistic tool to share with a follower of Islam.

Mark Snowden, Director
Mission Education Team
North American Mission Board, SBC

Baghdad Believer

In the context of global evangelization, the Muslim world continues to be a formidable barrier. That does not reflect a deficiency in the gospel but in those who share the gospel lacking a sensitivity and insight into how the good news of God's love through Jesus Christ is filtered through the Muslim worldview. Outsiders seldom comprehend the complexity of family, community, politics, and traditional values that inhibit a truth-seeking Muslim from understanding and receiving the gospel.

This personal pilgrimage, as graphically communicated by J. Neelson in Baghdad Believer, comes out of extensive experience and relationships in the Muslim world and will equip others to be more effective witnesses and disciplers in that context.

Jerry Rankin, President
International Mission Board, SBC

BAGHDAD BELIEVER

Through reading this book, you will:

- Experience how Iraqi Muslims are uniquely prepared to follow Jesus because of the Biblical values embedded in their culture
- See that reading and obeying God's Word are the keys to growth as believers, with or without group activities
- Realize that Muslims can follow Jesus while honoring family and friends
- Confront the assumptions about the Iraqi Muslims that keep you from joining in God's work among them

This personal pilgrimage . . . will equip others to be more effective witnesses and disciples in that context.

—JERRY RANKIN, President of International Mission Board, SBC

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be an Iraqi in Baghdad? This book is a must-read for those who are concerned for the over one billion Muslims in the world, and the "stranger in your midst."

—AVERY WILLIS, Executive Director of International Orality Network

Here finally is a book that shows the inside story - how Muslims feel when they learn to follow Isa.

—REINHOLD SCHARNOWSKI, Director of DAWN European Network

You have never before read such a candid account of a Muslim's journey toward God. You feel like you are right there on the streets of Baghdad with him, in the middle of the storm. Warning: Once you start reading, this book is impossible to put down!

—DR. GREGORY E. FRITZ, CEO of Initiative360 Take it global

J Neelson coaches cross-cultural disciplemakers to effectively integrate their personal, professional, and ministry strengths.

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