
Reading Locke on the Tigris

BY J. MARK LONG

In a remote city in war-torn Iraq, surprises abound. The trilingual conversation—in Kurdish, Arabic, and English—branches from natural law to constitutions, from Aquinas to Chomsky. And a simple invitation to prayer breaks through stereotypes. For this American professor, Dohuk becomes the place that “let me back in.”

I remember the scene with striking clarity, of thirty Kurdish professors in the mountain city of Dohuk talking at once, excitedly and passionately. As part of a team of twenty-two Baylor professors sent to northern Iraq in December, 2003, I listened intently to their discussion. The clatter of three languages—Kurdish, Arabic, and English—filled the university classroom. The lights occasionally blinked out because of unstable power grids, yet their trilingual conversation flowed unabated.

U.S. forces had just captured Saddam Hussein, and for this group of law and political science professors, it was their 1776, their day of liberation. They became particularly engaged during our workshop on John Locke’s ideas and the American founding.

Inevitably, powerfully, the talk among my Kurdish interlocutors turned to the year 1787 and to developing a national constitution that might “secure the blessings of liberty to themselves and their posterity.” As my new colleagues shared insights about natural law, intellectual property rights, limited government, and the political writings of Thomas Aquinas, their intellectual élan was hardly what I expected among a people once described as having “no friends but the mountains.” But in this place that had long ago bequeathed the western world its first literary narrative (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*) and law code (*The Code of Hammurabi*), and later translated the Greek and Latin classics that fueled the European Renaissance, the teacher

became a student. In many ways I was unprepared for what I would see and learn.

HOW I WAS SURPRISED

"Excuse me," a graduate student quietly asked in perfect English. "Thank you for coming. But I must ask you for a favor. I am doing my thesis on Noam Chomsky and there is a 1995 essay of his that I haven't been able to secure. Can you help me?"

How often I have felt "right" about my faith only by convincing others they were "wrong" in theirs. How often I have done apologetics but forgotten to give grace, to declare through my life as well as my words the gospel of our Lord.

A female professor of English joined our conversation: "You can't imagine what Chomsky has done to us. His ideas on transformational grammar have upended all our thinking."

Another surprise occurred as I walked with a law professor from another

Kurdish university. He paused as we came to a small classroom. "It is time for the zhuhr prayer," he told me, "and this is where I pray." I replied that I would wait outside the room. "No," he insisted, "please join me." "But I am a Christian," I reminded him. "That's fine. I would like you to pray with me nonetheless." And he quickly sent for another prayer rug.

Chomsky and transformational grammar! How many of my students at Baylor, I wonder, are reading Chomsky and having their ideas upended? And an invitation, offered in friendship and without coercion, to pray with a Muslim—this hardly comports with the stereotype many of us as Americans hold of those who practice Islam.

AND "LET BACK IN"

C. S. Lewis once wrote that the reason we "do literature" is that it "lets us out." Literature can move us beyond our otherwise narrow borders and show us a world we hardly dare to imagine. But then, Lewis continued, literature "lets us back in." We return from our reading with a new perspective on ourselves, and the resulting self-encounter can be extraordinary indeed.

Iraqi Kurdistan had a similar effect on me.

Of the many times I have traveled to the Middle East, this was my "literary" trip. I found the Kurds to be a people experienced in self-government, a people thoroughly educated, and a people hospitable even in their poverty. Indeed, they know full well what the brutalities of the Saddam regime have cost them in human capital and social development and real flourishing. Many of the faculty whom I met had been refugees, but now—

in a post-Saddam Iraq—they had returned to reclaim their lives. Going to Iraqi Kurdistan “let me out.” I saw a place I had not imagined existed.

But this remote corner of Iraq also “let me back in” by showing me the limits of my knowledge and reminding me of my tendency to carry stereotypes. And it said something to me about my faith. How often I have felt “right” about my faith only by convincing others they were “wrong” in theirs. How often I have done apologetics but forgotten to give grace, to declare through my life as well as my words the gospel of our Lord.

As a believer in Jesus Christ, I am squarely situated in the historic creeds of the Christian faith. Yet when I think of conversations with Kurdish professors about Madison and Jefferson and Aquinas, or when I recall a Muslim’s gracious invitation to pray, I am compelled to consider how much it is I have to learn. As Augustine reminds us in *On Christian Doctrine*, “Every good and true Christian should understand that wherever he may find truth, it is His Lord’s.”

I know that ultimately Christians and Muslims will not—indeed, cannot—resolve all differences of doctrine, just as American and Iraqi professors will certainly differ in their reading of Locke’s *The Second Treatise of Government*. But I learned in Iraq that it is possible for us to converse with charity. I saw the possibility of living as a worshipper of God who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ, while building friendships with and serving others in real humility, and learning from them in the process.

I journeyed to a remote, mountainous region of a war-torn country half a world away in order to read Locke on the Tigris. What I really read was an unwritten text—a place that “let me back in.”



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