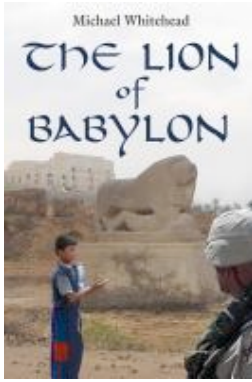


Michael Whitehead

# THE LION of BABYLON





*The Lion of Babylon* is a fable of men and women, Muslims and Christians, Americans and Iraqis, who look into their futures during a time of war to decide what will become of their lives. Haidar is an orphaned Iraqi boy who can see the future. The source of his special talent is a 2,500 year old statue called **The Lion of Babylon**. **The Lion of Babylon** foretold to Haidar that the Americans would come.

# The Lion of Babylon

Order the complete book from

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7907.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

Your free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!

# **The Lion of Babylon**

**Michael Whitehead**

Copyright © 2015 Michael Whitehead

ISBN: 978-1-63490-282-3

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Bradenton, Florida.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Printed on acid-free paper.

Booklocker.com, Inc.  
2015

First Edition

# Dedication

To those who didn't come back.



# CHAPTER 1

After two thousand one hundred and four days of waiting, an American soldier arrived, just as the vision had foretold. In his young life Haidar was burdened with the fact that while the visions were specific about future events, they were unclear about dates and times. In anticipation of this moment, and after years of effort, he obtained a halting command of English. Haidar ran to the soldier and introduced himself. The man's name was Murphy.

When Haidar was an infant, strange men from Baghdad came in the night and took his mother and father away, leaving him swaddled in blankets and asleep on the floor. The crying baby was discovered by his grandmother and taken to live with his father's brother and wife in Al Hilla, where the child was received but not welcomed. His uncle saw in Haidar an obligation of family and tribe but he still resented the boy's presence. He was a poor Shia and wondered if the men from Baghdad would return.

Al Hilla was a town of poor Shia; machinists who worked at the pistol factory, shopkeepers and farmers. The women were pious in their dress and prepared food for the pilgrims on their way to the Imam Husayn Shrine in Karbala. Barefoot children played on trash-strewn side streets of packed earth with the occasional putrid pools of water. When the dates were in season men squatted by the side of the road with a tiny scale, the brown fruit displayed on a cloth before them. Saddam ordered the construction of a great Sunni mosque in the center of town so that he would have a place to pray on the rare occasions that he visited. At times, when the citizens of the town walked past the gated enclosure, they could see flocks of birds rise from the turquoise dome and minarets into a blue sky.

Haidar grew into an inquisitive boy with a long, thin face and short, black hair that fell in curls on his forehead. Those he encountered were struck by the intensity of his gaze and the

ebony sheen of his irises. The shirt and pants handed down to him by his older cousin hung loosely on his thin frame. He had few material possessions, and his grandmother was his only source of affection and compassion. Everyone thought him a remarkable boy, different from the other boys. Like his father he had a keen intelligence and asked impertinent questions. This type of behavior, many believed, led to the death of his parents, and shouldn't be encouraged. When older relatives came to visit, and he thought that they might know or remember his parents, he would ask them the question, and his aunt or uncle would cut off the conversation with a sign or a word. His mother and father had been different, just as he was different, and his family seemed ashamed of that fact. Or afraid.

\* \* \*

The war came to Al Hilla when Haidar was twelve. A shattering explosion awakened almost everyone in the city in the early hours of a March morning. Some were startled awake by the bright flash of light through their windows. Others felt the tremor in their beds and sat up to hear the rumble of the fading echoes of the blast. When the light of the dawn crept over the horizon, they poked their heads out of doors and windows to see what the morning offered but there was only peace and silence. The braver ones ventured out and returned with excited reports of what they saw. Uninvited and unnoticed, Haidar followed his uncle and his cousins as they moved with the other men and boys into the center of the town, leaving the women to huddle together with their neighbors and speculate as to what had happened.

On the corner of the nearest street Haidar passed the same group of old men with gray stubble on their cheeks discussing the affairs of the world, smoking cigarettes, and drinking tea. Behind them, racks of brown, succulent chickens rotated on spits in a shop window. Cars, trucks, and carts pulled by donkeys undulated nearby in a disorganized mass, forcing the throngs of pedestrians to crowd even closer around Haidar on to the



## THE LION OF BABYLON

sidewalk. The balconies of the buildings bulged with laundry and people chatting with their neighbors. Electrical and telephone wires stretched in a convoluted tangle between the buildings and across the street.

Haidar moved like a rivulet through the crowd until he came upon the crumbled remnants of the destroyed telephone exchange near a bridge over a canal. The building looked as if it had been crushed by a giant hand, leaving the structures on either side undisturbed. Metal reinforcing rods, twisted and broken, poked from the jumbled concrete of the crushed walls. Haidar stared at the ruins and tried to call to mind what the building had looked like, but could only picture the dirt and dust and broken rocks that lay before him. Around him men argued whether the bomb came from an American plane or a group of Saddam fedayeen.

The arrival of the explosion and the war and the American soldiers who followed had been foretold to Haidar by the Lion of Babylon.

\* \* \*

Not far from where Haidar gazed at the wreckage, in the ruins of the ancient city of Babylon, a statue of a lion carved from dark basalt stood upon a pedestal astride a human form. A sand hill overlooking the statue rose to a hundred feet, crowned by a palace of light brown stone. Bushes in even, parallel rows, bisected by a road with light posts, covered the hill. The rising sun cast shadows amidst the large shapes and mounds scattered in the dark sand of the ruins. Beside the lion, bathed in sunshine, were newer battlements, made in the form and appearance of an ancient walled city. Saddam ordered the erection of the battlements upon the ancient ruins so that the people of Iraq would know the past glory of their country. He ordered the construction of the palace on the hill so that they would know the glory of Saddam. Beyond the palace was an array of date palms, their crowns bathed by the golden hue of the morning light. The limbs of the trees bore the yellow fruit that

turned brown and sweet with the passing of summer. Beside the palace a canal that Haidar's grandfather helped to dig flowed south, carrying water from the Euphrates River to the date palms, to the cattle coming down steep paths to drink, to the fishermen casting nets from wooden boats, and to the women in black, flowing robes kneeling among the reeds to wash clothes. Everywhere and everything not touched by the water was desert. For over two-and-a half millennia the Lion of Babylon dwelled there and passed images of the future to those who knew how to see them.

\* \* \*

Haidar learned about the Lion from his grandmother. Born in 1920 during the great revolt against the British, she was the only survivor in her family of a Royal Air Force attack on her village. She was raised by a cousin who lived in fear the rest of her life that the plane would return. His grandmother's earliest memories were of hot, dusty trips to the Shia cemetery in Najaf to visit the graves of her parents. Haidar had no memories of such visits because his parents were never heard from again, and no one could ever tell him where they were buried.

Haidar's grandmother taught him how to see the images of the Lion, and they conveyed visions of the future that the boy did not always understand. The oldest vision, and the one that recurred with the most frequency, told of the coming of an American soldier who would reveal what had happened to his parents. Haidar did not harbor the belief that they were still alive, although no one told him that they were dead, not even his grandmother. The secret desire of his heart, known only to the Lion of Babylon, was to discover where they were buried. He listened and obeyed the Lion because he believed that one day the Lion would give him the answer. But the vision never revealed the soldier's face, so he couldn't be sure that he would find the right one.

When he asked his grandmother to explain the visions that came from the Lion, she shook her head.

## THE LION OF BABYLON

“Child,” she said, “these visions come to you and are a part of you. You are the only one who can explain them and understand them. Be careful that you don’t mistake Allah’s visions for your own.”

His grandmother warned him about this often. She told him that it was the greatest danger for those who held the power, and must be avoided at all costs.

“But grandmother, how will I really know if what I see is Allah’s will?”

“If you look in your heart then you will know. And if your heart is closed off, then you will be no use to yourself or anyone else.”

But Haidar couldn’t tell if his heart was closed or open. She drew him into her arms, held him tight and spoke to him about his father. “Your father dreamed of things, child. He talked about you before you were even born. Before he had even been married. He had plans for you. But Allah did not permit it.”

“What kinds of things?” he asked, his face pressed into her breast.

“The Lion of Babylon spoke to him but he never knew it. Your father did not know the Lion as you and I do. The Lion taught your father the greatness of the Iraqi people. For this reason, your father always searched the past, looking for what he would find in the future.”

He lifted his head to look at her. “He looked in the past to see the future?”

She nodded. “That was his way. That was the only way he knew how.”

\* \* \*

Like an ancient fisherman the late evening sun cast a dark shadow from Saddam’s palace over the ruins of Babylon. The Lion called Haidar to the ruins whenever Murphy came to visit, and he squatted in the shadow of the statute, waiting for the soldier to arrive. To pass the time he wrote with his finger in the sand. When he heard the rhythmic sound of boots crunching the

ground he lifted his finger and saw the figure with the familiar gait. He pulled from his pocket a piece of bread.

Short and wiry with a dark complexion, Murphy was thirty-eight years old. He had close-cropped black hair, beginning to thin on the top, and a vertical scar on the left side of his chin. Because the ruins of the city were protected within the compound of the Coalition forces, he wore only his uniform with a soft cap and his rifle slung across his back.

“Sukran,” Murphy said, taking the offering and sitting with his back against the base of the statute. He took a bite of bread and as he chewed Haidar followed his gaze toward the Palace standing above them, quiet as an unwanted visitor. Polish Army soldiers walked at the base of the building.

Haidar was unsure how to begin their conversations. “You come back.”

“Sure I came back.”

In the presence of Murphy questions rose within Haidar like bubbles from an underwater vent. “Why you come here?”

“I don’t get to talk to very many Iraqis. You’re an Iraqi, aren’t you?”

Haidar nodded. “When you leave Iraq?”

“Oh, I got another six months. You ready for me to go?”

The call to prayer wafted from the city into the ruins. Haidar’s absence from his home would be noted and there would be repercussions, but that couldn’t be helped. He recognized the voice of the man summoning the faithful.

“Muezzin,” said Haidar.

“Muezzin?”

“He make call to prayer. At mosque.”

“So you know this muezzin?”

“Yes. He work with my father.” Haidar stood and motioned with his hand. “Here. I show you.”

He led the way from the level, flat ground around the Lion to a slope that angled down into the ruins. They entered a passageway between the strange rock formations, where the ancient brick construction could still be seen in portions of the

walls. Fragments of rock crackled under their feet.

Murphy stopped and Haidar turned. Murphy knelt to pick up one of the fragments and showed it to Haidar. The flat, smooth stone was covered with cuneiform writing. He dropped the fragment and then picked up another, and then another.

“Damn, Haidar. All these pieces here got writing on them.”

“Rocks speak to those who listen,” said the boy. “Come. I show you library.”

Murphy followed Haidar’s hurried footsteps to where the passageway split and they took the left branch. The new passage stopped after a short distance in a dead end with walls of earth and ancient brick towering above them.

“Here,” said Haidar. “Old library. My father find many books here.”

Murphy looked around. The walls and rocks and brick were no different there than anywhere else in the ruins. But they were to Haidar. His father touched these rocks. The muezzin told him.

“I remember” Murphy said. “Writing was invented here. Some guy named Hammurabi.”

“Yes,” said the boy. “Hammurabi. King of Babylon.”

Murphy reached out his hand and touched the wall. “The earth feels cool here. It’s all so old, so very old. Civilization was created here.” He turned toward Haidar. “Do these walls talk, too?”

Haidar nodded. “They speak to those who listen.”

“And where are these books that your father found?”

“In Baghdad. In museum.”

“That’s a good place for them. A museum.” Murphy smiled at Haidar. “Maybe I can meet your father one day.”

Haidar, his face impassive, shook his head, as if in an involuntary quiver. “Father gone. Saddam men come and take him.”

“You never told me that before.”

Haidar was not comfortable with this conversation, but found it hard not to answer Murphy. “You not ask.”

“So you live with your mother?”

“Saddam men take her, too.”

Murphy bit the inside of his cheek. “I guess I don’t really know that much about you, do I?”

“I not know much about you.”

Murphy nodded, looked at the sky for a moment, then back at Haidar. “I got two boys back home. One’s about your age. He’s smart, like you are. So where do you live, with your grandmother?”

“I live with father’s brother. And grandmother.”

“Maybe I’ll see your grandmother some day.”

Haidar didn’t think so. “Maybe.”

In the previous times that he met with Murphy he hesitated to ask the one overriding question of his life. Now, a new vision from the Lion of Babylon propelled him to speak.

“I need you help me.”

Murphy turned and walked back toward the statue of the Lion. “Sure. Whatcha need?”

Haidar followed. “Need help to find parents.”

Murphy stopped. “But you said they were dead.”

“Yes. I want to find burial place.”

Murphy shifted the sling of his rifle. “And your Uncle and grandmother don’t know where they’re buried?”

“No.”

Murphy knelt on one knee before Haidar, so that their eyes were at the same level. “If they can’t help you, how can I?”

Haidar fixed his gaze on Murphy. “You supposed to know where they are.”

“Me? How am I supposed to know?”

“Someone tell me you know.”

A half grin crept onto Murphy’s face. “Someone. Like who?”

Haidar looked away with a jerk and a half turn. “Cannot say.”

“Why?”

“I make promise.”

“Well, a promise is a promise.” Murphy put his hand on Haidar’s arm. “And you have to keep it. But I don’t know where

*THE LION OF BABYLON*

you parents are buried. And I would have a hard time finding them.”

“You supposed to know,” Haidar repeated to the ground.

Murphy tilted his head and stretched his neck. “I haven’t lived in this country very long. I don’t speak the language.” He gave a soft chuckle. “I can’t even move around that easily.”

“You go to Baghdad.”

“Yes, I go to Baghdad.”

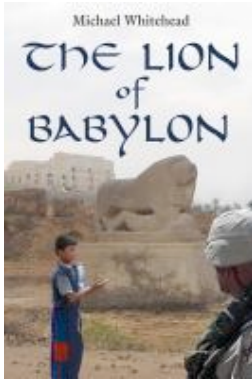
“Maybe someone in Baghdad know.”

A long silence ensued. “Maybe they do.” A notepad and pen materialized in his hands. “You pays your money, and you takes your chances. Gimme their names. I’ll ask.” He pointed his pen at Haidar. “But you got to help me out on this.”

Haidar nodded.

“This is not an easy thing you’re asking.” Murphy set his notepad on his knee and poised his pen. “These kinds of things can take a long time. You got to help me out.”

Haidar was silent, thinking. They didn’t have a long time. He now knew that they had less than six months. The Lion of Babylon had revealed to him that Murphy wouldn’t leave Iraq alive.



*The Lion of Babylon* is a fable of men and women, Muslims and Christians, Americans and Iraqis, who look into their futures during a time of war to decide what will become of their lives. Haidar is an orphaned Iraqi boy who can see the future. The source of his special talent is a 2,500 year old statue called **The Lion of Babylon**. **The Lion of Babylon** foretold to Haidar that the Americans would come.

# The Lion of Babylon

Order the complete book from

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/7907.html?s=pdf>

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**