

# IRAQ

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who stole the items will eventually sell them back to the museum, which he said contained numerous ancient artifacts.

"It isn't just a museum for Iraq, it's a museum for the world," Rev. Henshaw said.

Meanwhile, leaders of the Catholic Church likewise watched the war in trepidation, not only for its real impact on those who lived through it, but also because of its symbolic impact on a land second only to Israel in the number of times its territorial forebears are mentioned in the Bible.

"Christians feel a special attachment to this land (in Iraq) because it is where salvation began, just as they are attached to the Holy Land where Jesus lived. Now the tragedy of war has come to both places," said Swiss Father Georges Cottier, papal theologian at the Vatican.

## THE BEGINNING

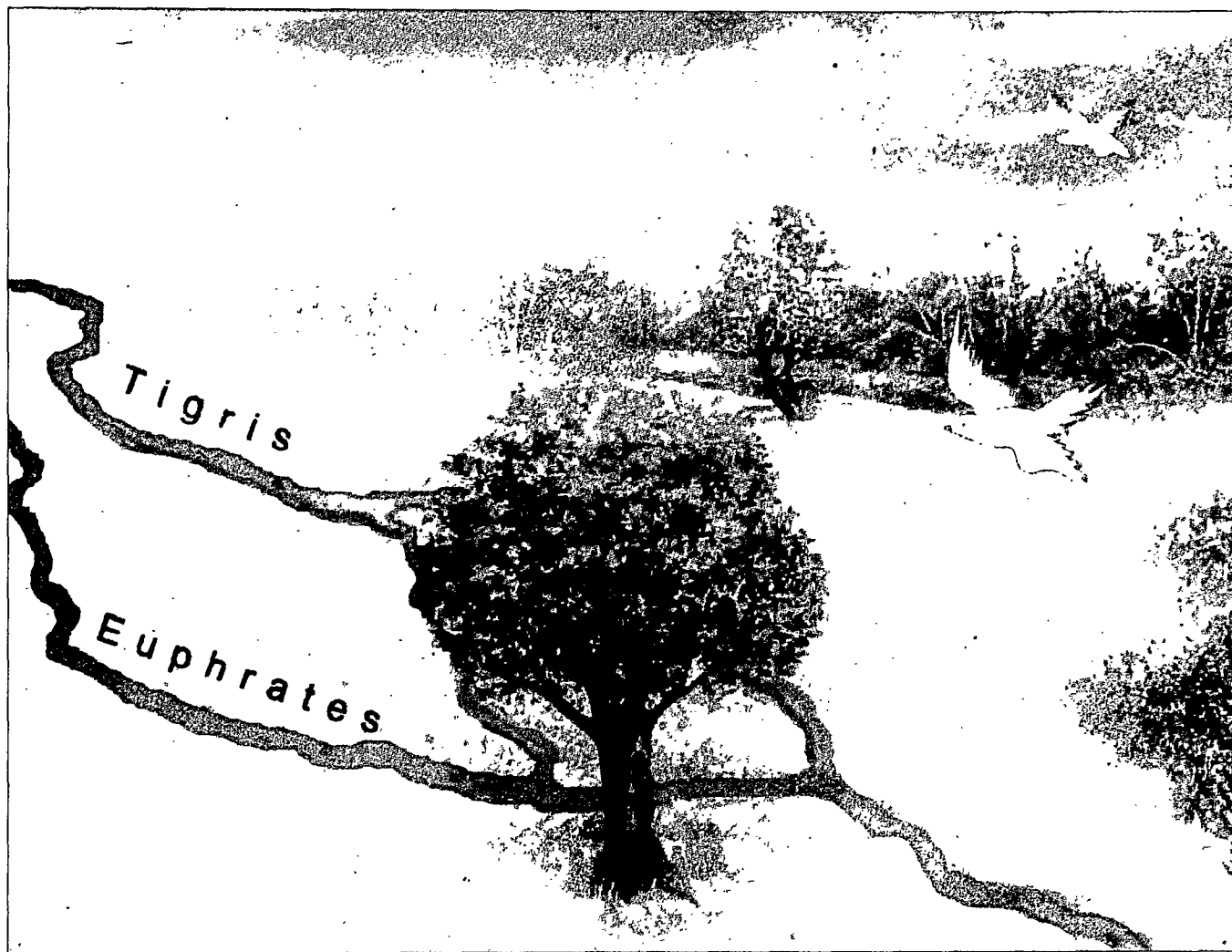
The presumed location of the Garden of Eden, traditionally thought to lie in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, became a combat zone in early April and was soon littered with burned-out military hardware. Many believe that Adam and Eve lived near the confluence of the two rivers at the modern city of Al Qurnah, which warplanes bombed heavily in early April.

Jets and helicopters were patrolling the skies over Ur, long considered the birthplace of the patriarch Abraham and the city from which he led his people on the long journey to Palestine some 4,000 years ago. Yet many scholars now believe that Abraham actually came from what is now southeastern Turkey, according to Rev. Henshaw, who noted that it was common in ancient times to link a prominent person to a prominent community.

"This great man must be located in a great city," Rev. Henshaw said in explanation of the ancients' reasoning.

Some of the current war's fiercest fighting has taken place around the port city of Umm Qasr. Some biblical scholars think the nearby remains of an early ziggurat, a high worshiping platform, may have been a model for the Tower of Babel. And at the site of the ancient city of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar's capital in the sixth century B.C., U.S. ground forces had their first major clash with Iraq's Republican Guard. Babylon was where the Israelites were exiled and where the prophet Daniel lived some 2,600 years ago.

Babylon's customs, traditions and myths are echoed throughout the



Linda Jeanne Rivers/Catholic Courier

Bible, according to Dr. Devadasan Premnath, academic dean at St. Bernard's School of Theology and Ministry in Rochester and a professor of the Hebrew Bible. The Old Testament stories of creation, the Fall, Cain and Abel and the Flood — as well as concerns about the afterlife and ethical and moral issues — have their counterparts in Babylonian stories and culture, he noted.

Premnath and other scholars, for example, have pointed out that the Babylonian epic of Gilgamesh contains a flood story, although there are significant differences between the Genesis account and the Babylonian one. On that note, many scholars have cautioned against drawing exact parallels between Babylonian culture and Hebrew culture, but have noted that the cultural and metaphysical concerns of the ancient world of Iraq are influential to this day.

"Because of the spiritual connections with the Old Testament, those in the West are the remote descendants of the Mesopotamians," Mark W. Chavalas wrote in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations*, a collection of academic essays published in 2002.

## THE END

The war's lethal progression through biblical lands and the feared use of weapons of mass destruction

led some apocalypse watchers to suggest that the end of the world and the second coming of Jesus may not be far off. Speculation has focused on prophecy in the New Testament Book of Revelation that one-third of humanity would be destroyed in a climactic battle in the Euphrates River valley. The name of the "angel of the abyss" who unleashes suffering upon the world is Abaddon, or Destroyer, which is also one translation of the name Saddam.

At the Vatican, fears about the war reflected more mainstream thinking. Church officials hoped for a quick end to the conflict because of the destruction and loss of life in Iraq. They were also alarmed that the war may displace the remnants of a Christian community that traces its roots to the second century.

The Assyrian Church of the East, although a minority, flourished for many centuries in Persia, which encompassed the territory of modern Iraq. In the fifth century, Persian Christians fell out of communion with Rome — partly because they began to follow Nestorian beliefs declared heretical by Rome and partly because their country was often at war with the Roman Empire.

Most of modern Iraq's 280,000 Catholics belong to the Eastern-rite Chaldean church, which split from the Assyrian church in the 1500s. The first Chaldean patriarch, or-

ained a bishop by the pope in Rome, was captured and executed in 1555 soon after he arrived back in his homeland. But the Chaldean church gradually grew, and by the time Iraq emerged as a modern state in 1932, Chaldean Catholics formed the bulk of the Christian population there.

Today, the Vatican yearbook still lists the patriarch of the Chaldean Church under the region "Babylon." It's an important link to the early chapters of the faith. But with the number of Catholics in Iraq rapidly declining — more than 250,000 have emigrated since the Gulf War in 1991 — Vatican officials are worried that this ancient Christian community could become a hidden casualty of the 2003 war.

Rev. Henshaw noted he had become acquainted with a man in Iraq who was proud to be a Chaldean Christian. He added that the Iraqis he met were generally proud of their nation's links to humanity's earliest cultural achievements. That pride will steady the Iraqis well as they begin to emerge from decades of repression under Saddam Hussein's cruel rule, he added.

"They're a brilliant people," Rev. Henshaw said of the Iraqis. "They were brilliant in the past and will be brilliant in the future."

Contains reporting by John Thavis of Catholic News Service.