



Speech by Mr Hubert Debbasch

On the occasion of the official opening of the Babel Tours company in South Iraq

Sunday 18 April 2010

Governor,
Ambassador,
Mayor,
President of the Commission,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I wonder if I dare tell you that I have been waiting for today for nearly thirty years now? I wonder if I dare tell you how overjoyed I am to see each and every one of you here in Nasiriyah? In any case, there can be no doubt that here, you have to dare. You have to dare to come here, you have to dare to build a company with the vocation of bringing tourists to the province of Dhi Qar, from which they will then be able to visit all of Mesopotamia.

While on the subject of daring, I feel that I must first of all mention someone, my spiritual father, the Patriarch Abraham - Ibrahim. According to a very ancient tradition, Abraham came from Ur, just a few kilometres from where we find ourselves today. It is also in Ur that we will complete the inauguration of Babel Tours today. Abraham is rightly known as the "Father of the faithful". Even if the believers of the three great monotheistic religions have slightly different interpretations of the life of this patriarch, they each see in him a model of humanity and faith. The foundations of Babel Tours lie in Kurdistan, which is home to Muslims, but also to Yezidi and large Christian communities. I felt that it was essential for Babel Tours also to take root here in the land of Abraham. As we all know, Shia Muslims are by far the most numerous here. The staff of Babel Tours are all from this great community and we are in the process of organising pilgrimages to centres of the Islamic faith, such as Najaf and Karbala, the third and fourth most holy places for Shia Muslims, after Mecca and Medina.

Having mentioned the spiritual and religious dimension, which is a key factor in my commitment here and, as I well know, one that is dear to the hearts of most inhabitants of Nasiriyah, I would like to mention an even more universal aspect of these places. In Nasiriyah and in many of the surrounding archaeological sites, each and every one of us can find his or her roots. Not far from where we are, writing was born 3200 years before our era began. In the words of the great American historian Samuel Noah Kramer, this is where history started. Allow me also to quote a French researcher who spent his life trying to understand and share his knowledge of the civilisations of Mesopotamia: "Mesopotamia occupies an organic position along the time-line of our own past. That is why, from the historical and genetic aspects, which explain children by their fathers and rivers by their sources, we can understand nothing of this past without reaching back to it"¹ It is therefore the universal dimension of this place which touches me and which, in my opinion, will also reach out and touch increasing numbers of travellers.

As you can see, I am trying to identify the main reasons that would convince large numbers of tourists to come to Iraq, and more particularly to this region. I have already mentioned the religious aspect of these lands and their immense cultural riches. But Mesopotamia is also a remarkable wonder of nature. Perhaps that is why for millennia it has been the place where the history of man and the history of God have converged. And I am particularly fond of this ancient tradition which situates Paradise between the Tigris and the Euphrates, here in Mesopotamia. We are at the tip of the Fertile Crescent, one might say its source. Today's travellers love the desert: they will not be disappointed here. The vast plains of Mesopotamia offer an infinite horizon to all those who feel hemmed-in by their day to day lives and can barely find enough room even to breathe. Travellers have always sought the sun: here they will definitely find what they seek! Today's travellers look for new and little-known places: paradoxically, this land, which bears the oldest traces of civilisation, offers something radically new:

¹ Jean Bottéro, *Mésopotamie – L'écriture, la raison et les dieux*, Folio, Paris, 2008, p. 66.

the first groups that will soon be coming here with Babel Tours will be among the first travellers of our time who will be able to discover, or rediscover Mesopotamia.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends. In this land where everything that makes us human and civilised was invented, everything remains to be invented. To conclude, I would like to quote the thoughts of one of our future tourists who wrote to me a few days ago about the archaeological sites. With reference to some countries in which the sites are in a better state of conservation, he said to me: "I know that for the eye, there is nothing particularly spectacular, but for the spirit and the imagination, it's exactly the opposite. That is what I'm really looking for." Yes, Babel Tours wants to enable all those who come to Iraq to open their minds and broaden their imaginations. We want to offer a different kind of relaxation, intelligent relaxation. We also want our tourists to enjoy the legendary hospitality of those who inhabit the country. To finish, and this might surprise those who are unfamiliar with the region, I would say that a trip to Mesopotamia is a great step towards peace.

Hubert Debbasch
CEO of Terre Entière
CEO of Babel Tours

"Mesopotamia: the birthplace of history"

The first cultural tour in South Iraq
In partnership with *Témoignage chrétien*

- ✓ From 6 to 14 June 2010
- ✓ 9 days, 8 nights
- ✓ In the company of Catherine Sudre, archaeologist, Hameed Nasser, author of the book *Revoir Bagdad*, Luc Chatel, editor in chief of *Témoignage chrétien* and Hubert Debbasch, CEO of Terre Entière and of *Témoignage chrétien*
- ✓ Cities and sites on the program: Nasiriyah, Ur, Lagash, Larsa, Ash Shatra, Ngirsu, Uruk, Babylon, Eridu, etc.

About Babel Tours

Babel Tours is a new tour operator. The primary aim of the agency is to welcome tourists, pilgrims and travelers visiting Iraq. The agency headquarters are located a few kilometers from the center of Erbil, the capital of Kurdistan, and just a few minutes from the international airport, in the commercial quarter of the town of Ankawa, a prosperous city currently enjoying sustained development. Babel Tours offers high-quality services to all those who wish to come from around the world and discover the cultural and natural riches of Iraq. New offices in Nasiriyah give now the opportunity for Babel Tours to offer services in all the south (Najaf and Karbala, Sumerian archeological sites, Bassorah...)

Babel Tours is a subsidiary of Terre Entière, a French tour operator specializing in cultural tours and Christian pilgrimages, and already employs Christian and Muslim staff who devote their expertise, professionalism and commitment to this meeting of cultures. All types of tours are accepted, irrespective of the religion and origin of the travelers, provided that they respect both the country and its authorities and provided that they are also able to accept the full human diversity of Iraq.

Babel Tours proposes tours accompanied by guides throughout Iraq. The agency will also gradually be able to offer all types of services for tourists: hotel bookings, transport, guides for trips to a particular town. Based on a network of skilled personnel and extensive local knowledge, Babel Tours offers you a chance to discover Iraq in complete safety and peace of mind.