

The Infidels

by [Joe David](#) (December 2015)



The Infidels

Joe David

The Baghdad Desert, Summer of 1915

She awoke on a bed of sand in the hot desert – a fourteen-year-old dropped in the middle of nowhere, alone, shaded from the harsh sun by a small tree. There was a glazed look of emptiness in her eyes. It was the unnatural stare of a child, numbed by grim reality, who had seen more than she could comprehend.

She looked around, startled by the harsh surroundings – a few trees and other plants, and endless sand in a featureless setting that seemed to stretch into eternity. It all looked so unfamiliar, like nothing she could remember. She tried to make sense of what she saw and uncover an explanation for what had happened to place her here in time, but she couldn't think. Horrific images of butchered people, too real to ignore and too disconnected from reality to understand, overwhelmed her, making it impossible for her to form a single thought.

Her mind had turned into a kaleidoscope of shifting images: of clergy with their eyes gauged out by knives, wandering in circles, confused, pushed aside or to the ground by men on horseback to trample or shoot; of people on the run kicking aside decapitated human heads like rubber balls as they dodged bullets and swords; and of a young girl, screaming in pain, while a rough and cruel soldier with a wild and insane look rejoiced in his lustful conquest.

She wanted to cry out and release the demons inside responsible for filling her head with such images, but she had no strength. She stared at the starchy-stiff red spot on her white dress near her left breast, as though it held an explanation of who she was and how she got there, but no explanation came. She was just someone taken from somewhere, dropped in the middle of nowhere, to be dried like animal

hide, surrounded by poisonous snakes and disease-carrying insects – haunted by horrific memories.

She wondered if there was any escape from this inferno. Yet, if there were, would knowing make any difference? An overwhelming fatigue left her feeling lifeless – with barely enough energy to make even the slightest movement.

Her lips, which were parched and cracked, were painfully sore when she caressed them with her tongue. She looked about for some water to drink to put out the fire consuming her. But all she saw was brownish white sand that stretched in smooth waves of varying height all the way to the horizon and a few nearby trees and bushes, which hid deadly creatures that came out in the cool night for food.

She began to cough. Huge clots of blood came up, several lingering in her throat, nearly choking her before she was able to release them. She panicked at the sight of the thick, bloody globs that she spat on the sand.

Tears began to flow, pitiful tears, drowning her youth with sorrow. She remembered the gunshots, and a voice of a woman call to her, “Judith, come inside. Now, Judith, *right away*.” This was followed by more gunshots; they were heard everywhere, from behind the parapet on the roof of the house – and from outside the great wall surrounding the house.

“Mamma, don’t leave me,” she cried, as the woman faded away. “Please, mamma, I need you.”

She tried to lift herself up and failed. The slightest effort sent a pain through her so severe that all she could do was lie still in her bed of sand until it passed.

“Come back, mamma. I beg you,” she said tearfully, as she gazed about at the ocean of sand, surrounding her. “*I’m scared.*”

Something moved nearby, almost imperceptibly. It was camouflaged by the sand. It seemed to slither like a snake. Fear gripped her. She tried to focus on it. But her eyelids were too heavy. Everything was growing blurry. She slept, but not soundly. Images returned – bloody and brutal images of women and children being flayed with the same care one might take to skin an orange.

She woke up screaming, “Mamma, I beg you. I’ll be good! I promise. *Please* come back.”

It was almost dark, and, with the setting sun, no longer unbearably hot. In fact, it was growing chilly, and she needed something to keep her warm. As she looked about for a cover, not more than five or six feet from her she saw almost invisible activity. Little creatures of different sizes and shapes restlessly crawled about; some were even airborne. Observing them closely, she wasn’t sure if they were insects or sand carried about by the early evening breeze.

She listened, but heard nothing except silence. She listened harder, and the silence was broken by the gentle sound of insects in flight and the movement of the wind, playing capriciously with the sand.

With this growing darkness came fear – the fear of the unknown, of what awaited her in the night. She tried to calm herself. “The Lord is my shepherd,” she recited, over and over again, until the words and the meaning sank deep, and she finally felt a calm settle over her. Then she heard a gentle voice from her past, “You mustn’t worry, my child. You’ll never be alone. I’ve asked the Lord to watch over you.”

That evening the young girl slipped into a silent and restful sleep, comforted by the gentle voice from the past.

It was morning when she was awakened with a start by a soldier; he stooped near her, shaking her. He and his search party had come by camel and truck, to scout the area. Several

other soldiers were staring down at her. They were inquiring if she were still alive. As she looked up at the fair-haired men, armed with rifles, she was overcome by a mixture of fear and hope. "Will you take me to my mamma?"

A smile of relief instantly broke across each man's face, as they nodded in unison.

British Hospital, Baghdad

The girl found it impossible to focus on what was happening around her. Whenever she tried to concentrate, her eyelids would involuntarily close. All she could see, when she forcefully lifted them, were blurred images distorted beyond recognition. Hovering over her, peeking through this blur, were two pairs of blue eyes.

"She's still bleeding, Doctor."

"Quickly," a man said. "To the operating room. We must operate immediately."

The anesthetic had taken control, leaving her too weak to respond. Voices rose and fell around her, some more urgent and disturbing than the others. They were the tearful voices of pain and sorrow. To the young girl on the gurney, being wheeled rapidly to the operating room, they were just meaningless sounds totally removed from her reality.

She awoke from anesthesia hungry and confused with a violent headache. When her gaze surveyed the room, she saw nothing familiar, nothing that would reveal exactly where she was. She turned her gaze inward. Perhaps she might uncover a clue in the dark labyrinth of her mind – a lingering fragment of reality that would lead her to discovery. But she was too tired to search. Her mind was a void, a *tabula rasa* with nothing, not even a fragmented image, to examine.

To her right was a wall and a nightstand which contained a pitcher and glass of water. Above the nightstand was a crucifix of Jesus and a framed verse from St. John 3:16. Without reading it, she was able to recite it by rote. The words just flowed effortlessly from her lips, as though someone else were speaking them for her. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."

She was startled by this spontaneous recollection. How could she remember the verse so exactly, she thought, but could forget everything else?

A white curtain separated her from her neighbor to the left. The woman on the other side of the curtain was talking to someone. Her words were clouded with grief. Although the woman tried to hold back her tears, some of them spilled out as she spoke. The girl listened, feeling an undefined terror well up within her, as she was swept along by the woman's painful story. Each word the woman uttered brought the girl closer to the center of her own terror, without ever identifying it.

"It was late at night when I was abruptly awakened," the woman was saying. "Outside I heard screaming and wailing, interrupted by gunshots. My husband jumped from the bed and climbed up the ladder. When Elijah opened the skylight and looked out, he gasped in horror. Huge flames were leaping into the air, brightening the night. Before I could grasp what was happening, he returned to my side in panic. 'Get the baby. We've got to leave. Now. Right away.'

"I didn't say anything. I just grabbed the baby and anything else I could find quickly, and we hurried into the cold night. Cries of frightened people were heard everywhere – some were begging for mercy for their children and their loved ones; others were reciting verses from the Bible before being silenced with gunshots. I didn't look back. I just kept

running, as Elijah told me, into the woods, cuddling the baby close for warmth and protection.

“As I was running for safety into the darkness, I saw the village blacksmith limp towards the woods. But before he could reach the creek, he collapsed. My husband ran to him, lifted him up and started to drag him across the creek, into the dark woods. A man on horseback rode towards them and commanded them to stop. When my husband looked up, the man aimed his gun at Elijah and shattered his face with bullets; then, he shot the blacksmith several times in the chest.

“I hid behind a bush and remained there all night, cuddling my baby and weeping silently.” She paused; she was breathing heavily and painfully. “It was daybreak when I was found,” she continued. “He was a big man who smelled like an animal bathed in the blood of death. The minute he saw me I tried to run, but he grabbed me and yanked my baby from my arms. Alma immediately began to cry, kicking her feet and flapping her hands in protest. When I pleaded with him to release her, he merely laughed at me like a madman.

“He took my baby, my little Alma who was barely three months old, and flung her into the air – and then caught her overhead with his bayonet!” The woman paused and began to weep. “When I saw the pure evil of what he had done, the sight of my baby girl impaled lifelessly on the bayonet, I let out a cry of horror so loud that even the heavens shook. *That dreadful beast, that diseased vermin, he killed my baby girl, and he enjoyed doing it!*

“To him, it was a joke. A sadistic, perverted joke. When he was sure he had caused me as much grief as possible, he came after me.”

The woman’s tone unexpectedly changed and her words turned to icicles. “I didn’t plan what followed,” she said. “It just happened. When he threw me to the ground and began to enjoy

the spoils of his victory, that's when I acted and did what I thought I could never do. My opportunity came while he was forcing my body to respond to his physical rhythm. Hatred welled up within me, and *I nurtured it without guilt!* I grabbed the knife secured to his belt and began stabbing him – first in the waist, then the groin, and then in the face. I kept stabbing him repeatedly, wherever I could, until I had no strength left. I don't remember much after that. I don't even know how I made it to Baghdad. Everything else is hazy."

As the young girl listened, she remembered her own story. The pieces of her past began to come together one by one. First there was the caravan, then the gunshot, and finally *the man*. All at once she was seized by a sorrow so disturbingly profound that her entire body began to tremble. The woman's story had opened the floodgates. In one clear moment the young girl remembered everything. With one inconsolable scream that seemed to last forever, she released her painful nightmare for everyone to hear. Nurses rushed to her side in alarm. "I want my mamma," the young girl cried. "*Someone please get me my mamma!*"

The newspapers printed her picture and released the news that a "miracle had happened." The article read:

A fourteen-year-old Christian Assyrian girl has been found alive after being shot at and left to die in the desert. Her name is Judith Shamash, born August 14, 1901, in Northwest Persia, in the village of Shamash. She is the daughter of Malko Shamash, a wealthy landowner, and his wife, the former Abigail Tamras, daughter of the prominent scholar and Presbyterian minister, the Reverend Daniel Tamras.

Anyone who recognizes the girl and knows the whereabouts of her immediate family should contact the British Hospital in

Baghdad.

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Joe David is the author of numerous articles and books. His most recent is [*The Infidels*](#). For more information about the author, visit www.bfat.com.

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