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# **Iraq full of historic sites important to understanding Christianity**

## ***Pope Francis will visit Ur, the birthplace of Abraham, recognized as the patriarch of faith in one God by Jews, Christians and Muslims***

By Dale Gavlak, Catholic News Service

Ucanews (17.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3udkTeu> - Pope Francis hopes to embark on the first-ever papal visit to the biblical land of Iraq in early March in a spiritual pilgrimage of sorts to the place known in Arabic as the "land of the two rivers" -- the mighty Tigris and Euphrates -- and once renowned as Mesopotamia, the "cradle of civilization."

The Garden of Eden is believed possibly to have been in ancient Iraq, but certainly the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Tower of Babel were located there. Jews exiled to ancient Iraq in Old Testament times, such as the prophet Daniel, experienced God's miraculous grace; Daniel was rescued from the lion's den and his friends from the fiery furnace.

"The pontiff said he looks forward to visiting our country, which is also where Abraham began his journey," Cardinal Louis Sako of Baghdad said of the March 5-8 trip.

The historically rich country is full of religious sites important to understanding the antecedents of the Christian faith, making the visit significant for Pope Francis. Here's a snapshot of some of these places.

Old Testament patriarch Abraham is recognized as the father of faith in one God by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike and was born in the southern town of Ur. The place, which dates back to 6000 B.C., lies on a former course of the Euphrates and is one of Iraq's oldest sites.

The pope will see a dry, flat, and ocher-colored plain renowned for its well-preserved stepped platform or ziggurat, which dates back to the third millennium B.C. Also, some of the earliest known writing, cuneiform, has been uncovered at Ur.

Around 2000 B.C., Ur was a bustling urban center, drawing traders from both the Mediterranean and the Indian subcontinent, until its conquest by Alexander the Great a few centuries before Christ. Pope Francis will participate in an interreligious meeting there.

Pope Francis will travel to Nafaq, also in the South, for a key encounter with one of Shiite Islam's most authoritative figures, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, as part of his efforts to embrace all of the Islamic world.

Lying 100 miles south of the capital, Baghdad, Najaf is a center of Shiite Islam's spiritual and political power as well as a pilgrimage site for Shiite adherents. Its spectacular gold-domed Imam Ali Mosque is considered the third-holiest site for the Shiite Muslims, after Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia.

Flying into Baghdad from Rome, Pope Francis will be received in an official welcome ceremony at the presidential palace. At the capital's Syriac Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Deliverance, he will meet bishops, priests, men and women religious, seminarians and catechists. The cathedral was the site of a 2010 massacre that killed 58 people and was claimed by Iraq's al-Qaida group, which splintered into the so-called Islamic State.

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