



ORAHAM, ALEXANDER JOSEPH

ORAHAM, ALEXANDER JOSEPH (b. Armudāgāj, 7 February 1898; d. 1953, [Figure 1](#)), [Assyrian](#) physician and lexicographer, born in the village of Armudāgāj of the Urmia District, [Azarbaijan](#). Until the age of thirteen he studied at the village school, where many Assyrian men and women received their primary education. Later he attended the Lazarist Mission School (see [FRANCE xv. FRENCH SCHOOLS IN PERSIA](#)) in Urmia but emigrated to the United States in 1913 and settled in Chicago. He studied at the Jenner Medical College in Chicago for two years (1915-17), and by 1925 earned a doctoral degree in medicine with specialization in microbiology from the Physicians and Surgeons College of Microbiology.

In 1928 he set up an X-ray laboratory in Chicago, a very successful endeavor that he maintained well into the 1940s. In 1941 he established there the Consolidated Press (Assyrian Press of America). His principal publication product was *Oraham's Dictionary of ... Assyrian Language and English* (1943; for sample pages, see AIM). Oraham worked for twenty-five years on this dictionary, often devoting his evenings to it while he maintaining his medical profession. He and his wife, Alma, set the type themselves; he would do the English, while she did the vernacular Assyrian (Assyrian [Neo-Aramaic](#)). In his introduction, he calls this vernacular [Aramaic](#) "Assyriac" to give it a clear and distinct identity, as opposed to the multiple and possibly confusing terms found in use, such as "[Syriac](#)" (including East and West Syriac), "vernacular



Syriac” (e.g., titles of MacLean, 1895, 1901), and “Old” and “New” Syriac (see MacLean, 1895, p. 2: these were “for convenience” but “something of a misnomer”). Having been well trained in both the classical Syriac and spoken Assyrian language, Oraham knew that the spoken language of Assyrians was not classical Syriac, although both are included in the same Aramaic family.

This dictionary, reprinted by the Assyrian American diaspora and used throughout the English-speaking Assyrian diaspora, runs up to 21,000 words. The dictionary has a practical and educational design for a broad public (cf., for this orientation, his publication of an Assyrian “Textbook for the children” [illus., Shoumanov, p. 47]). As the preface states (see also Sabar, p. 410), it intended to assist the immigrants’ learning of English. The book provides a key for reading works in the vernacular language. Each entry appears with a full complement of short vowel diacritics as well as the silent letters and Syriac diacritics for borrowed consonant sounds. Oraham also provides a pronunciation guide for each word, in Roman letters, based on a system without diacritical marks but with the use of double vowels for long sounds and use of “y” for diphthongs. For simplicity, he did not distinguish between velar consonants and aspirated ones in the transliteration.

Oraham’s Dictionary is a standard source for the Urmia dialect of vernacular Aramaic. Reflecting the polyglot community, it contains many borrowings from Turkish and some from Persian, but Oraham, with focus on clarity and usefulness of the entries, did not include etymologies. The work he did at a time of increased Assyrian flight from the Middle East, went a long way toward easing transition into English for the thousands of Assyrians literate in their own language but with limited skills in English.

Oraham died at the age of fifty-five. He never published his translation into the spoken language, from classical Syriac, of *Ktābā d-marganītā* (The book of the Pearl; see Teule; for the pearl as a religious symbol, cf. Russell). This was one of the works of the bishop of Nisibis and scholar, Mar Abdisho bar Brikha (d. 1318).

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