



YOHANNAN, ABRAHAM

YOHANNAN, ABRAHAM (1853-1925; [Figure 1](#)), Assyrian scholar, philologist, historian, and humanitarian advocate. He was the first “Oriental” to teach Oriental languages at Columbia University.

Education and early career. Abraham Yohannan (b. 25 April 1853; d. 9 November 1925) was born in Ābājāluy near Urmia (Āḡarbāyjān-e Ġarbi province, Iran; Razmārā, p. 1). His father, grandfather, and other ancestors as far back as can be traced were priests of the Nestorian Christian Church. He received his early education in the schools of the Presbyterian missionaries at Urmia, and learned Syriac under the instruction of his father, the Rev. Kasha Yohannan. In 1864 he enrolled in Urmia College, which had been founded by American missionaries as a school of higher education for boys. He took a six years’ course encompassing the study of Oriental languages, Aramaic, Arabic, Syriac, Hebrew, Persian, and Armenian, in addition to science and theology. Some time before his graduation in 1870, he was appointed to teach Oriental languages in the College, and he held that position until 1886 (Chamberlain, 1899, p. 458).

According to his autobiographical sketch (Yohannan, 1900, at end), he came to the United States in 1886 at the invitation of the American Bible Society to help prepare a revision of the New Testament in Assyrian Neo-Aramaic; this had been translated and published first by the American missionaries in Urmia in 1846 (see Murre-van den Berg, 1996, p. 14). Yohannan was among the newly educated Assyrians who, over the years, tried to encourage the elimination of borrowed words from neighboring languages into the Neo-Aramaic literary



language that was being developed with the help of missionaries working among the Assyrians. He and his family remained in the United States; he pursued studies at the General Theological Seminary (1888-1890) and graduated with a degree in theology. In April 1891 he was ordained by Bishop Henry C. Potter as a priest in the Episcopal Church (Clowes, 1935, p. 340).

Ministry. At Saint Bartholomew's Church in midtown Manhattan, under Rector David H. Greer (1888-1904), a Rescue Mission and a Chinese Mission had been established in 1889, shortly after his arrival, and an Oriental Mission for Middle Eastern immigrants soon followed (Clowes, 1935, pp. 176 ff., 220 ff.). The church would become noted for its range of social initiatives and outreach (see, e.g., Tolman and Hemstreet, 1904, pp. 179-82; Wilson, 1896, p. 29). Yohannan was hired for the Oriental Mission, and he served as an assistant minister of St. Bartholomew's Church from 1890 to 1918 (Clowes, pp. 226, 339). His congregation consisted of Armenians, Syrians, and other representatives of the Near East. On Sundays, he held separate services in Turkish, 'Syriac' (i.e., Neo-Aramaic), Armenian, and English; Bibles, hymnals, and prayer-books were supplied in the several languages of the Mission (ibid., p. 226). Yohannan himself prepared and printed in 1892 an Armenian translation of the "Order of the Evening Service" of the Episcopal Church, and in 1904 he published "The Order of the Evening Prayer, according to the custom of the Episcopal Church of America" for his Syriac community (Muss-Arnolt, p. 170). These translations may be the ones referred to in a brief mention of Yohannan's Oriental Mission (Ruess, 1903, p. 4).

The Mission was felt by the Episcopal diocese to be of value in serving social needs, including preparation for United States citizenship, of the working class families who attended, even if few became communicants in the Episcopal Church (Clowes, p. 226; Yohannan's counts in ibid., p. 227). By the end of World War I, the Near Eastern immigrants had followed the movement of silk weaving and other textile employment to other cities, and the Mission ended (ibid., p. 228). Yohannan's son Isaac would serve the growing Assyrian community in nearby Yonkers (see below).

Academic career. In 1893, Yohannan entered the School of Philosophy of Columbia University to pursue his studies in Semitic languages under [R. J. H. Gottheil](#), the orientalist and Zionist leader, and Indo-Iranian languages under [A. V. W. Jackson](#), the well-known scholar of pre-Islamic Iran. He received his MA in 1894 and was appointed Honorary Lecturer in Oriental languages in 1895, and he became a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. In



1900 he submitted *The Modern Syriac-English Dictionary* (the letter *allap* only, in 65 pages) in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Philosophy, Columbia University. The news of his achievement was announced in the Assyrian press in Urmia (*Zahrir d-bahra* 54, 1903; Macuch, *Geschichte*, 1976, p. 154). No further letters of the alphabet were published, and it remains unknown if he ever continued or completed the dictionary.

Yohannan served at Columbia in the position of “instructor in Oriental languages” (1894-1925). In this post, he taught all levels of Persian and Turkish, plus Armenian, Syriac, and also Neo-Aramaic (‘modern Syriac’) “in case there should be a demand” (*CU Announcement*, 1917, p. 18; pp. 21-22). He also maintained close communications with the Assyrian community in Iran. His letters from New York were published in *Zahrir d-bahra* “Rays of light” (*ZB*), one of the first magazines published by the American missionaries in Persia (Macuch, 1976, p. 136; Wilmshurst, 2011, p. 408). Through him historical lectures by Jackson were translated and published, along with descriptions of his work, in 1907 (*ZB* 46, no. 6, 1895, p. 41; Macuch, pp. 154, 158, 163, 177; [*ZB* 1903, 11]; Macuch, pp. 160-61, 166, 167, 168, 169, [*ZB* 1905-07]). His reputation in Iran was such that a personal biographical piece on him was written in *Kokbā* “The Star,” the Assyrian periodical of the national movement, in 1911 (*Kokbā*, 5, no. 23, 10 June 1911, pp. 268-69).

Whereas Yohannan served as a cultural intermediary at the height of the American academy, his position at Columbia was precarious. Despite Jackson’s continued support for Yohannan, the university president, Nicholas Murray Butler (1862-1947), was opposed to his receiving a full position, and Yohannan had to solicit his own salary from outside benefactors (Columbia University Archives, Central Files, folder for Abraham Yohannan, box 664, folder 29; Becker, 2015, p. 323). He sometimes is cited in print—by error or by courtesy—with the title of “professor” (e.g., see Yohannan, 1903, 1916c; Yohannan and Jackson, 1914a; *NYT*, 1914; Holm, 1923; Clowes, p. 226).

Yohannan published several scholarly works in collaboration with A. V. W. Jackson. Among them was “Some Persian References to Zoroaster and his Religions,” (*JAOS* 28, 1907), an article about *Şowar-e aqālim-e sab’a* “Sketches of Seven Countries,” a text written ca. 1400, in which Zoroaster’s prophetic mission and teaching are described. Many of the statements contained in the Persian text have parallels or analogues either in the Pahlavi writings or in the Avestan texts (Yohannan and Jackson, 1907, p. 188). Together (1914b) they



edited *A Catalogue of the Collection of Persian Manuscripts: Including also some Turkish and Arabic presented to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York* by Alexander Smith Cochran Metropolitan Museum of Art, which was the first scholarly study of material owned by the Museum (Ettinghausen, 1972). The catalogue has become a highly valuable research tool since its publication and has been reprinted several times.

In 1914 the *New York Times* announced the discovery of 11 *robā'iyāt* verses, found in a 19th-century manuscript of a poetic anthology by the noted collector and dealer Hagop Kevorkian (1872-1962), that he “believes to be absolutely new” (NYT, 1914, p. SM2) and authentic compositions of Omar Khayyam. This find was no doubt exciting to devotees of [Edward Fitzgerald](#). The article, picked up by other newspapers, brought publicity to Yohannan as well. He translated the texts, and they were versified by the poet Joyce Kilmer (1886-1918) for the press (Potter, p. 109, no. 340). Yohannan and Jackson (1914c) collaborated on a paper regarding the verses, and their considered judgment in the Cochran volume (1914b, p. 83) rejected any attribution to Khayyam.

Yohannan’s academic publications include his translation into Modern Assyrian (Neo-Aramaic) of the Book of the Pearl by Mar Audisho (d. 1318). It was printed and published by [Samuel A. Jacobs](#) in New York in 1916, and the volume is an excellent example of early Assyrian printing in the United States using Linotype. In 1916 he also published “A Manuscript of the Manāfi‘ al-Ḥaiawān in the Library of Mr. J. P. Morgan” (JAOS 36, 1916, pp. 381-89), one of the precious manuscripts from the thirteenth century, written in Arabic by Abū Sa‘id ‘Obayd-Allāh b. Bōktīšū‘ in the eleventh century and later translated into Persian by ‘Abd al-Hādī at the direction of the Il-khanid [Ġāzān Khān](#).

Yohannan donated to Columbia University “60 books in Arabic script, comprising manuscripts and printed books,” of which his list, November 1913, is in the university libraries; in the library record, he is described as “Iranian-American,” and his Assyrian heritage is omitted (Yohannan, 1913).

Yohannan, with his letters and articles regularly appearing in the Urmia Assyrian periodical *Zahrīre d-bahra*, thus became the intellectual voice of Assyrians in the American diaspora. As such, and because those traveling across the Atlantic Ocean were processed at Ellis Island, the immigration port of New York, many among the educated Assyrians traveling to the United States, especially as students, listed Yohannan as a personal reference and his



address in Manhattan as their initial destination.

The Assyrian crisis. Yohannan became a key publicist in English for the devastation visited on the Urmia Assyrians and other Christians during World War I. His book *The Death of A Nation: or, The Ever Persecuted Nestorians or Assyrian Christians* (1916a) gives the history of the small sect of Nestorians, and the author describes centuries of suffering endured by the Christians of Persia and northern Mesopotamia up through the massacres of the hands of the Turks and Kurds in 1915. An abridged edition (1916b; CU, 1917, p. 43) contains the introductory survey (pp. 1-26) and the account of 1915 events (pp. 115-51 [exact pagination of 1916a]).

In August 1916, a conference was convened at Columbia by William Walker Rockwell (1874-1958), a professor of Union Theological Seminary; he was an active member of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, which had its headquarters in New York City (see Rockwell, 1916, Introduction). The chief product of the conference was Rockwell's book, containing documentation on the situation of the Assyrians from the American Committee, the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission, the Foreign Board of the Presbyterian Church, and other sources. Yohannan took part in the conference, as did the Presbyterian missionary William Ambrose Shedd (1865-1918)—who, immediately afterward, returned to Iran and to Urmia—and Paul Shimmon, representative of the Assyrian patriarch (see Mar Shimun, p. 440) and himself a vigorous writer regarding 1915 and current events (Shimmon, 1915, 1916; see also Grabill, p. 329).

For some time during 1917-18, Yohannan and Columbia colleague [Louis H. Gray](#) participated, under Jackson's direction, in studies for the monumental Commission of Inquiry ('The Inquiry,' for which, see Grabill, p. 102) that was ordered by President Wilson in preparation for future peace proceedings. In a document of 10 May 1918, it is stated that "the reports on Persia are provisional but satisfactory"; however, "Dr. Yohannan's services have been terminated" (United States Department of State, p. 87). Perhaps his closeness to the Assyrian problem was judged to be prejudicial: whether before or after termination, "in 1918 he had filed with The Inquiry a request that Wilsonian principles be applied to the Nestorians" (Grabill, p. 153).

The tenor of whatever he wrote to the Department of State may have been influenced by shock at the assassination of the patriarch Mar Shimun (Shem'on XIX Benjamin) on 3 March 1918 (account in Werda, 1924, repr., p.



124; *Report*, p. 273). On 27 May, trying to help further the cause of the Assyrians and Armenian affected by the war, Yohannan wrote a letter regarding the news of this murder to Randall Cantuar, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who in response expressed his deep sympathy for the Assyrians and the Armenians. In commenting on the news, Yohannan describes in details the horrors inflicted upon Assyrian and Armenian populations in Urmia “from savage onslaught of the Turkish and Kurdish armies. ... The Russians’ departure from those regions was the herald for the Kurds and Turks to pounce upon the prey from which they had so long been held at bay. ... A concourse to the number of about eighty thousand men, women and children, leaving their crops in the fields, their household goods and all the supply of food, hurried, pain-stricken, on the long and painful journey of several weeks to Hamadan, in hope of being nearer to the British army ...” (Yohannan, 1918; cf. the account in Wilmshurst, pp. 422-23).

Yohannan was, moreover, a friend of W. A. Shedd and must have felt deeply the latter’s death, which occurred, from cholera, on 7 August 1918, in the course of the mass flight of 80,000 Assyrians and Armenians southward from Urmia toward Hamadan, escaping the advancing Turkish force (*Report*, pp. 272, 275). His tribute to Shedd is quoted in the preface to the latter’s biography (M. L. Shedd, 1922, pp. xi-xii).

Also at some time during the war years, according to C. E. Clowes (p. 226, dates not specified), Yohannan “was ordered to Washington to assist the Post Office department in handling Turkish mail.”

In 1919, Yohannan was able to reach Paris, although not as a delegate to the peace conference, through the influence of his friend Robert E. Speer (1867-1947), secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions. There he labored to interest delegates in Assyrian affairs, although in vain (Grabill, pp. 153, 237). He prepared a *Petition of the Persian Assyrians to the Peace Conference* and a map (presumably in support of the document) called *Sketch-map of the Regions by the Persian Assyrians* (CU, 1919, p. 38; Grabill, p. 329, n. 34). His attitude was a politic one; he would have been content with protection of the Assyrians by the major powers (see quotation in Grabill, p. 153).

In contrast, the prominent New York Assyrian Joel E. Werda (1868-1941), journalist and publisher (see in SAMUEL A. JACOBS), minister, and president of the Assyrian National Associations of America, made more emphatic demands for Assyrian nationhood (see Robson, pp. 149 ff.). Werda was the



primary author of a petition titled *The Claims Of The Assyrians Before The Conference Of The Preliminaries Of Peace At Paris, 1919* (see Stanford University Libraries; text online, at Kliszus and Kliszus, 1999). Speer had held aloof from Werda (see Grabill, p. 329), and Yohannan may have done the same. But both Werda and Yohannan, like so many spokesmen in Paris—Assyrians from the Middle East, Armenians, and hopeful representatives of other ethnicities—were destined to meet with disappointment.

After the turmoil of Paris and the death of his wife soon after, Yohannan turned again in his academic work to pre-Islamic studies (1923, 1925). He also produced a small essay for a federal government publication (1921), a brief introduction to a travel book (Holm, 1923), and, in Neo-Aramaic, an educational “elementary arithmetic” (1922) which was published at the Polytype Press (CU, 1923, p. 42) of S. A. Jacobs. Upon his death on 9 November 1925, Yohannan lay in state in St. Bartholomew’s Church prior to the day of his funeral (NYT, 1925). He was among the deceased who were commemorated in the annual memorial service at Columbia’s St. Paul’s Chapel (NYT, 1926).

Yohannan married Sanam Tuti (b. 1859-60; d. 14 February 1920) of Urmia in 1872. They had three sons and three daughters (Chamberlain, 1899, p. 458; listed in their mother’s obituary, NYT, 1920, p. 22, with misspellings; correctly, in NYT, 1966). One son, Isaac Yohannan (1875-1971), prepared at Trinity School in New York City for St. Stephen’s College (now Bard College) and became an Episcopal priest in April 1900 (Clowes, p. 340). He became vicar of the Assyrian Mission at Saint John’s Church in Yonkers, New York, where he served from 1917 onward, and where a sizeable Assyrian community lived. He also was the author of an “Introduction to a Commentary on St. Matthew’s Gospel” and “Essays on Eastern Churches and Liturgies” (NYT, 1971).

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