The traditional Palestinian Arab house appears to be an extensively and well studied subject. Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century travelers and observers have left many descriptions of indigenous Palestinian dwellings and of domestic life in Palestine, and a short monograph specifically dedicated to the Palestinian village house appeared as early as 1912. During the period of British rule (1917–48), two studies were published that are still cited as the standard sources on the subject: Taufik Canaan’s *The Palestinian Arab House: Its Architecture and Folklore* (1932–33) and the volume dedicated to “the House” in Gustaf Dalman’s seven-tome compendium, *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (1939). Scholars have since produced a considerable body of work relating to the geography, history, and architecture of Palestinian settlements. The fact that the British Museum shop now offers visitors an illustrated booklet entitled the *Palestinian Village Home* suggests it has become a “classic” of vernacular architecture.

A review of this relatively abundant material reveals, however, that the treatment so far given to the subject of traditional Palestinian domestic architecture deserves some criticism. One problematic aspect of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century descriptive literature is its predominantly biblical-archaeological inspiration: many authors regarded the landscapes of Palestine as illustrations for the Scriptures, and their texts are frustratingly burdened with biblical quotations. Behind this attitude lay the assumption, often taken for granted, that traditional life in Palestine had remained unchanged for millennia. This bias affected our two standard authorities, Canaan and Dalman, as well. Canaan writes:

> It may be assumed that, in general, the present people of Palestine are housed in a manner not greatly different from the manner usual in ancient times: a minute study of the methods of construction and use of the Palestinian Arab house, and the folklore associated with it, may therefore throw direct or indirect light on earlier conditions.

Dalman, on his part, appends to each description a sub-chapter entitled *Im Altertum* that lists all the possible comparisons with antiquity. It is interesting to note a similar attitude in a Hebrew work.

The biblical-archaeological perspective resulted in a tendency to emphasize the archaic, the primitive, and the “pure”, a bias that may have been reinforced under the British Mandate by colonial preservationist attitudes toward the “authentic” aspects of native societies. Thus, most of the attention was devoted to the humble village house (with preference to its common, modest examples) that seemed to accord with the image of ancient life. Other types of domestic architecture were simply glossed over, or completely ignored. Dalman explains in the introduction to his book:

> Since the Palestinian house is to be considered here from an archaeological point of view, the town house would remain in the background, because there European influence has prompted various changes that are irrelevant to our purpose. As for the village house it is accepted that in its materials and design it stands close to Biblical antiquity.

Students of Canaan and Dalman are left with the impression that the Palestinian Arab house is synonymous with the village house, beside which there is little of consequence.

Traces of the belief in the timelessness of Palestinian traditional architecture seem to have survived into recent scholarship. Thus, ethno-archaeologically oriented studies of Levantine Bronze Age settlements, and even studies of Byzantine villas and farmhouses, attempt at interpretations using analogies with the primitive village house. Conversely, some look for the origins of the village house in prehistory. Drawing analogies between modern primitive examples and antiquity is not necessarily fruitless or methodologically misguided. However, in interpreting Palestinian architecture it may be equally — if not more — to the point to suggest analogies with other Middle East-
ern vernacular traditions, or even “high” examples of Islamic domestic architecture. Not much has been done to exploit this line of interpretation; political borders, as well as language barriers, may have discouraged this. It seems that in Palestine the biblical perspective excluded an Orientalist approach.

Finally, it appears that many of the authors writing on the Palestinian Arab house were seldom interested specifically in its architecture, but rather in issues of biblical studies, archaeology, folklore, geography, or historical geography. Their concerns and methods were therefore not wholly identical with those of an architectural historian. In much of the available literature, such architectural considerations as design, space, and typology remain somewhat out of focus. Canaan, for example, whose folklorist interests often led him to long digressions on customs or popular sayings, lacked the technical knowledge to discuss architectural form. Historical-geographical research has in the last twenty-five years produced numerous and extensive studies on the physical aspect of nineteenth-century Palestinian settlements, but as these stop short of actually recording and analyzing architectural plans, their contribution to the study of architecture remains incomplete.

These drawbacks to the existing scholarship on the Arab house suggest the need for a new, revised account of Palestinian domestic architecture. The following discussion attempts to avoid some of the biases criticized above and examine the new conclusions that thus emerge.

THE PALESTINIAN VILLAGE HOUSE

The village house is the best known Palestinian house type. It has been described at least since the seventeenth century, sometimes at length, in traveler accounts and scholarly essays. Relatively ample documentation, including measured drawings and photographs, has been published. The early account by Comte de Volney, the French historian and statesman, who traveled in the Near East in the 1780’s, already offers a concise description of all the chief characteristics of the village house:

The houses, on a nearer view, are only so many huts, sometimes detached, at others ranged in the form of cells around a court-yard inclosed by a mud wall. In winter, they and their cattle may be said to live together, the part of the dwelling allotted to themselves being only raised two feet above their beasts.

Further detail is added by Mary E. Rogers, the wife of the British consul to Haifa, writing about a century later:

A gateway ... led us into ... [a] court, which was the only entrance to a square vaulted hall. This was the governor’s residence — his dining-room, withdrawing-room, nursery, stables and kitchen all together! On one side, just within the door, a mule was feeding; ... a patient ass stood by him. On the left hand there was a broad wooden platform, raised about two feet from the ground, with a low ornamental wooden railing at the edge of it. Here mattresses and lehaffs were piled up....

The Palestinian village house, as these two sources describe, followed two general principles:

1. The whole house consisted of an all-purpose rectangular room where all household activities — living, sleeping, work, and storage of produce — took place. The nuclear family and its dependents, sometimes as many as 25 persons, as well as their livestock, all shared this single space.

2. The space was divided into two zones by a difference in level: a lower “soiled” area (usually called qa’ al-bayt) near the entrance, and an elevated space reserved for living and sleeping (mastiaba).

Using these two determining principles, a great variety of layouts were possible (figs. 1–3). The division into levels could be achieved in a manner ranging from the vestigial to the elaborate; the area of the two zones and the level difference between them both varied. The soiled area might consist of a small square near the door, 10–15 centimeters lower than the floor of the house, where visitors would leave their shoes; or it might take up a sizable part of the floor area providing space for work and for stabling animals; or, in a more developed variation, the elevated surface might be constructed as a gallery, leaving usable space underneath and requiring access by a staircase. Sometimes a gallery and an elevated platform were combined in the same house, in which case a gallery was used for storage. A bench for sitting or reclining may run along the wall of the mastaba. In the better houses, or in village guest-houses (sg.: madafa), this could take the form of a complete stone divan (fig. 3a).

Some houses had an exterior mastaba, in front of the house or on the roof, for outdoor sitting. It could consist simply of a low terrace of rubble contained by