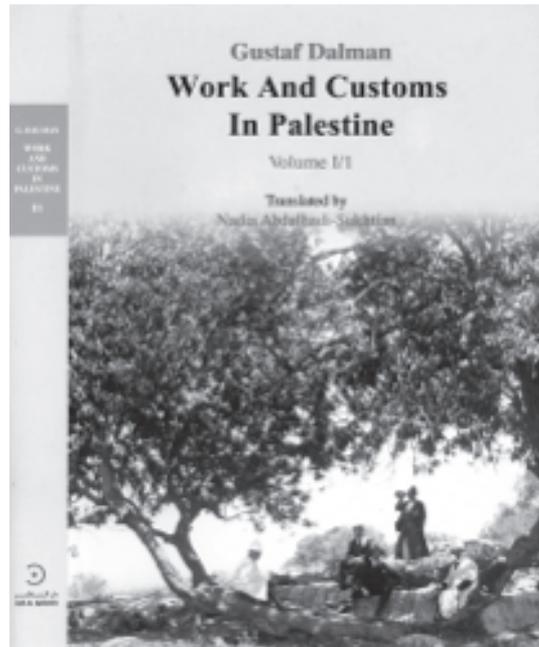


## Dalman for All Seasons Book Review

*Work and Customs in Palestine*,  
Volume I. Gustaf Dalman, Trans. Nadia  
Abdulahdi-Sukhtian. Ramallah: Dar  
Al Nasher, 2013, pp. xii + 662, indices  
to p. 715, 38 unnumbered pages of  
photographs.

Reviewed by Alex Winder



In 1899, Gustaf Dalman arrived in Palestine for the first time, spending two months there prior to a seven-month stay in Aleppo. He returned immediately afterward and eventually spent some twelve of the following fourteen years in Palestine, where he established and directed the German Protestant Institute for the Archaeology of the Holy Land in Jerusalem. In this time, Dalman collected the bulk of the field research that would form the core of his magisterial *Arbeit und Sitte in Palästina* (*Work and Customs in Palestine*). Seven volumes of this work appeared between 1928 and 1942, and the eighth was published posthumously in 2001. Now, a century after Dalman experienced and recorded life in Palestine, Volume I of *Work and Customs*, “The Course of the Year and the Course of the Day,” has been translated into English for the first time.

The book is in two parts, the first of which deals with autumn and winter and the second with spring and summer. Dalman proceeds methodically and in great detail through the course of a year and teases out the complex

interconnection between the natural calendar (divided most broadly into two main seasons, the dry summer and the rainy winter), the astrological calendar (measured by the rising and setting of particular constellations), and the religious calendar (marked primarily by Christian feast days that divide the year into seven periods of roughly fifty days each). As he guides the reader through a year, he observes and comments on the conditions and habits associated with these various periods, including: basic climatic patterns, such as temperature, wind, and precipitation; the planting and harvesting of crops; wild flora; religious festivals and celebrations; and much else.

The primary thrust of Dalman's work is to observe the Palestinian present (in the early twentieth century) in order to better understand the Bible, both as a text and as a description of a past Palestinian reality. Despite the problematic nature of such a venture, the sensitivity with which Dalman undertook it allowed him to observe and record Palestinian society with a mind more open and an eye more observant than most. In the preface, he cautions against being

... seduced into concentrating only on those points that at a first and perhaps very superficial glance seem to show biblical connections. How often does a closer look show that the connections point in another direction. It is also not permitted to report in the descriptions only those aspects that contribute to explaining biblical expressions and statements. (pp. viii)

Dalman's adherence to this approach allows his work to remain valuable to scholars interested in Palestine's ancient and its more recent pasts.

Indeed, it feels at times that two distinct themes coexist within this volume of *Work and Customs in Palestine*. On the one hand there are the attitudes and practices of Palestinians in the late Ottoman and early British periods, which are brought to life through the multitude of folk sayings, expressions, songs, and practices observed and recorded by Dalman himself or by his contemporaries, including the Palestinian Tawfiq Canaan and the various Orientalists writing in German and English whom Dalman cites. Those interested in Palestinian life during this time will find rich material including descriptions of prayers for rain in different Palestinian villages (pp. 135–150), the impact of autumn storms on the Jaffa port (p. 159), the various wild herbs eaten by Palestinians in the spring (pp. 350–53), and the numerous spring festivals celebrated by the major faiths in Palestine (pp. 436–483). The disruptive impact of Zionist settlers even at this early stage can also be seen in Dalman's description of the drought year of 1925. Crops failed, entire villages relocated, and trains from the coast brought water to Jerusalem, where it could be distributed "only in limited amounts, against payment, to the people queuing in long lines at the taps. However, the need for water had increased because the government had neglected to make the building of cisterns in the new houses of the Jewish immigrants obligatory" (p. 183). Dalman often includes the specific location where he observed particular practices or heard certain expressions, showing an appreciation of the variations within Palestinian culture, whether urban or rural, settled or Bedouin, from the coastal plain or the hilly spine of Palestine. Similarly, he does not treat Palestine as

*sui generis*, drawing parallels to Syria, Greece, and other societies.

On the other hand, these observations are intertwined with Dalman's biblical scholarship, which draws on texts ranging from the Mishna and the Palestinian Talmud and their tenth-century translation into Arabic by Sa'adia ben Yosef to the works of Josephus, Maimonides, and Zakariya al-Qazwini. Dalman's work here is largely philological, seeking through the consultation of classical sources, as well as his own experiences in Palestine, to achieve more precise definitions of words and more accurate readings of passages from the Bible. His reflections on the transformation of the pagan origins of festivals and practices, such as Sukkot (pp. 165–68) and Passover (pp. 458–469), after the advent of monotheism in Palestine are particularly interesting. Other times, Dalman's efforts to link twentieth-century Palestine to the biblical text feel unnecessary or limiting. One need not experience the torrential force of water rushing through a Palestinian wadi after a rain to understand the plea offered to God from one who has "fallen into depths of water and the whirl is pulling me away" (Psalms 69:2) (p. 218). Nor does a literal explanation, in the form of a dust storm, for the darkness that covered the land on the day of Jesus's death seem necessary (p. 331).

Overwhelmingly, however, Dalman's ability to draw confidently on a vast array of sources in multiple languages and disciplines, his careful observation of the natural landscape of Palestine, and his impressive facility with spoken Arabic are evidence of a unique erudition. Nadia Abdulhadi-Sukhtian's excellent translation eloquently renders both the intricacies of Dalman's scholarship and his nearly poetic descriptions of a Palestine that has largely disappeared, such as the commingling of plant, animal, and human life around the spring at 'Ayn Fara (pp. 545–48) or the sunset over the Palestinian hills near Jerusalem (pp. 561–62). One awaits the translation of the following seven volumes, which promise further insights into Palestinian society in the early twentieth century.

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