

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2025, Term III.5

Opening Comments

One of the major developments in Christian theology in the twentieth century was the rejection of 1800 years of anti-Jewish theology in all Christian communions that took place in response to the Holocaust. Beginning with *Nostra Aetate* at Vatican II in 1965, Christian communions have turned to Paul's statement in Romans 11:28-29: "28 As regards the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their ancestors, 29 for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." In contrast to the universal Christian teaching that the Jews have been rejected by God for their failure to believe in Jesus, and have been forced to live in exile from Jerusalem ever since as punishment for this inexcusable sin, the Roman Catholic Church and other churches now teach that God never stopped loving the Jews, and God never abandoned the covenant with the Jews, since "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable." Building on this claim, made by the apostle Paul, theologians from many traditions have looked again at the promise God made to Abraham to give him and his descendants the land of Canaan, and have seen this promise as coming to life again with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. In the readings I sent out from Term 2, we see Gary Anderson, a Roman Catholic theologian, turn immediately to this promise when discussing how Christians are to understand Zionism. "Any discussion of the modern Zionist movement must begin with the biblical claim that the land of Canaan was given by God to the people Israel." Anderson points out that unlike every other people's natural relation to their homeland, the relation of the Jews to the land promised to them by God is supernatural, and therefore unique. Similarly, Gerald McDermott, an Episcopal theologian, quotes Paul's statement that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, and claims that "the land was God's principal gift to the Jewish people," meaning that "Jews have more title to the land than any other people."

The reading for this week comes from a group of eleven Palestinian Christians responding to Zionism, and especially Christian Zionism, in the context of the Palestinian Nakba and the continuing occupation of Palestinian land by the Israeli government. To put this document in context, Christians make up just 2% of the Arab citizens of Israel, and 2% of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza, and as the *Kairos* document points out, those numbers are dropping due to emigration. Roughly sixty percent of Israeli Arab and Palestinian Christians belong to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem, while another thirty percent belong to the Melkite Greek Catholic Church, which is a Church of the Byzantine rite with loyalty to the Pope. There are roughly four thousand Anglican and four hundred Lutheran Arab Christians in Israel and the West Bank. It should be pointed out that *Kairos Palestine* has not been officially endorsed by the Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Anglican or

Lutheran Churches.

The *Kairos Palestine* document of 2009 was written primarily by Naim Ateek, an Anglican theologian, and Mitri Rahab, a Lutheran theologian. Both of them are Palestinian liberation theologians, which is a school of theology started in Latin and North America which seeks to join with the oppressed in their liberation struggle with their oppressors. God and Christ are always on the side of the oppressed seeking to liberate them from oppression, as God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. This document was formulated with the special objective of refuting Christian Zionist theology, claiming that such theology is political and ideological, but not Christian. In order to make this claim, *Kairos Palestine* returns to pre-Vatican II Christian theology, which sees all of the promises of God as fulfilled in Christ, and hence as no longer applicable to the Jewish people. “Our Lord Jesus Christ came, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was near. He provoked a revolution in the life and faith of all humanity. He came with “*a new teaching*” (Mk 1:27), casting a new light on the Old Testament, on the themes that relate to our Christian faith and our daily lives, themes such as the promises, the election, the people of God and the land.” The new light revealed that the promises made to Israel in particular are now in Christ made universal, and are hence applicable to every human being throughout the world, and no longer to the Jews. “We believe that our land has a universal mission. In this universality, the meaning of the promises, of the land, of the election, of the people of God open up to include all of humanity, starting from all the peoples of this land.” Far from seeing the gifts and promises of God to Israel as irrevocable, as the apostle Paul insists, *Kairos Palestine* insists that applying the promise of the land to the people of Israel, along with any other promise of God to them or election of them, transforms the Word of God “into letters of stone that pervert the love of God.” Such an interpretation makes the Word of God into a “dead letter” that brings “death and destruction” to the Palestinian people.

However, *Kairos Palestine* goes on to argue that God has put two peoples in the land of Palestine, Christians and Muslims, which means that their presence in the land is not accidental, but is deeply rooted in the history and geography of this land. Over against the Christian Zionist claim that God’s promise of the land to Israel is irrevocable, this document claims that “Our connectedness to this land is a natural right. It is not an ideological or a theological question only. It is a matter of life and death.” On this basis, *Kairos Palestine* advances its primary theological thesis: “We also declare that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights, bestowed by God.” This argument provides the main foundation for the refutation of Christian Zionism: “We declare that any theology, seemingly based on the Bible or on faith or on history, that legitimizes the occupation, is far from Christian teachings.” In other words, for *Kairos Palestine*, Christian Zionism is an oxymoron, which justifies the sin against God and humanity of the Jewish occupation of Palestinian land.

Over against the Christian Zionist justification of the sin of Israeli occupation, *Kairos Palestine* claims that Christians have the right and the duty to resist this occupation. The document places such resistance in the context of the command of Jesus that we should love our enemies. Hence, this

resistance must be done as an act of love, and not of revenge. “We say that our option as Christians in the face of the Israeli occupation is to resist. Resistance is a right and a duty for the Christian. But it is resistance with love as its logic.” It is hard to understand where *Kairos Palestine* finds the Christian duty to resist evil, for in the very same chapter in Matthew in which Jesus commands his followers to love their enemies, he also tells them the following: “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’³⁹ But I say to you: Do not resist an evildoer.” Moreover, *Kairos Palestine* seems to renounce violence as a means of resisting evil, seeking instead to root such resistance in the logic of love. “We do not resist with death but rather through respect of life.” But then it goes on to praise those who have given their lives in resistance, including apparently suicide bombers, for by the time this document was written, there had been 150 suicide bombings in Israel, from restaurants and buses to wedding celebrations. “We respect and have a high esteem for all those who have given their life for our nation. And we affirm that every citizen must be ready to defend his or her life, freedom and land.” Far from condemning such murderous attacks, most often perpetrated by Hamas, *Kairos Palestine* speaks of them as a form of legal resistance. “Israel used this as a pretext to accuse the Palestinians of being terrorists and was able to distort the real nature of the conflict, presenting it as an Israeli war against terror, rather than an Israeli occupation faced by Palestinian legal resistance aiming at ending it.” Indeed, the conflict would end, and the resistance would disappear, if Israel simply ended its occupation. “Yes, there is Palestinian resistance to the occupation. However, if there were no occupation, there would be no resistance, no fear and no insecurity. This is our understanding of the situation. Therefore, we call on the Israelis to end the occupation. Then they will see a new world in which there is no fear, no threat but rather security, justice and peace.”

The question with which I will leave us is this: exactly what does *Kairos Palestine* mean by “the occupation”? Does it mean what the Palestinian Declaration of Independence means, namely the occupation of the lands conquered by Israel in the 1967 war, which would be East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza? Or does it mean what the Covenant of Hamas means, which would be the entire State of Israel? Perhaps the thesis sentence of *Kairos Palestine* provides the answer: “We also declare that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights, bestowed by God.” “It was an injustice when we were driven out.”