

On what basis do Palestinian Christians argue for faith, hope and love ‘in the absence of all hope’ (*Kairos Palestine*, p. 4)?

On the basis of a theology that acknowledges their particular context, Palestinian Christians can speak of faith, hope and love and also of justice. This theology works towards bringing justice and peace to the Palestinian people, Christian as well as Muslim.¹ The theology explored here is that represented by Naim Ateek, and the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Centre, and Mitri Raheb and the International Centre of Bethlehem. This Palestinian Christian theology is sometimes but not always termed a liberation theology. For Ateek, a Palestinian theology of liberation, although having links with other Christian liberation theologies, is a specific response to the historical and present day situation in the land of Palestine and Israel. Raheb sees the theology as a contextual one, speaking of God and humanity, humanity in distress.² On the basis of theological understandings of faith, hope and love including a particular view of the character of God, Palestinian Christians have embraced a vision of the future which speaks of hope arising from a seemingly *hopeless* situation. Following the structure of the 2009, *Kairos Palestine* document, “A Moment of Truth”,³ which puts forward the theological response of Palestinian Christians to their twenty-first century situation, I will explore this theology through a series of headings: faith, hope, love, and justice. Jerusalem, also, has a special place within this theology. Palestinian theology must also acknowledge history and the injustices of recent history.⁴ Thus I will begin with a brief look at the Palestinian story.

1 The history of the Palestinian people in the land of Palestine and Israel.

This short section cannot be a comprehensive historical investigation. I will focus on the early displacement of the Palestinians after the founding of the State of Israel, give a brief overview of other events and then emphasise the effects of the occupation of Palestinian territories that continues today. The first and third sections will be done through story but it is story within theology. In telling their stories, two Palestinian theologians, Ateek and Raheb, represent the narrative of the Palestinian people. The twentieth century brought displacement of people, dispossession of their land and military occupation, injustices which the twenty-first century must acknowledge.

The family of Ateek had lived in the village of Beisan since the 1920s, having moved there from Nablus, but were expelled from their house and village in 1948. Israeli revisionist historian, Ilan Pappé, gives evidence of the nature and scale of the expulsions.⁵ Ateek briefly

¹ Mention is often made of the low percentage of Christians in the Palestinian population, far fewer than pre-1948, but this will not be further discussed. This theological response has a space for all.

² Differences in terminology will be alluded to in this essay but not taken up as a major point.

³ <http://www.kairos-palestine.ps>.

⁴ The importance of historical context is stated by many: eg David J. Pleins, “Is a Palestinian Theology of Liberation Possible?” *Anglican Theological Review* 74:2 (1992): 135-6.

⁵ Ilan Pappé, *A History of Modern Palestine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, 2006), 136, 138. Ilan Pappé is Senior Lecturer in Political Science at Haifa University in Israel (back cover); his Israeli background, xxi. He is cited by Naim Stifan Ateek, *A Palestinian Christian Cry for Reconciliation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis books, 2010), 40-43; also Pleins, 136.

tells his story in his early book, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation*, although the focus is not on himself. He writes of 'a first experience of Israel':

Our house was on the main street, so as a boy I watched the Zionist troops, the Haganah, come into our town past our door, watched them enter every house in the neighbourhood, looking for weapons. They searched our house, too, but did not find any. My father had never owned a gun; he did not believe in doing so.⁶

When the soldiers occupied the town the family had been reluctant to leave, although many had fled after hearing of the massacre of two hundred and fifty four people in Deir Yasin.⁷ Two weeks later, on May 12, 1948, the military governor informed the town leaders that "Beisan must be evacuated by all of its inhabitants within a few hours".⁸ The Muslims of the town were sent to the Transjordan (now Jordan), and the Christians to the outskirts of Nazareth. "Within a few hours our family had become refugees, driven out of Beisan forever."⁹

Pappe's account of the events of this period fits within Ateek's description and extends it. The pertinent section is titled, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.

Within the Jewish state proper, a strange and chilling situation developed around 300 or so Palestinian villages. In order to convey to readers what happened, I will focus briefly on the chronicles of 64 villages out of the 370 wiped out by Israel, in order to highlight a situation within the heart of rural Palestine that led to its almost complete disappearance.¹⁰

The details are indeed chilling and include what happened at Tantura where after separating the men from the women and children, two hundred young men were "massacred".¹¹ Pappe is careful to give many statistics. "Three-quarters of a million Palestinians became refugees. This was almost 90 percent of those living in what was designated as the Jewish state."¹² This catastrophe, the Nakbah, "would be remembered in the collective national memory".¹³

Ateek goes on to speak of his own family and the wider Palestinian experience.

⁶ Naim Stifan Ateek, *Justice, and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 7.

⁷ Ateek, *Justice*, 8; also Pappe, 129; also Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2011), 472.

⁸ Ateek, *Justice*, 9.

⁹ Ateek, *Justice*, 10.

¹⁰ Pappe, *History*, 135.

¹¹ Pappe, *History*, 136. Also, "There were similar incidents in many other locations, the details of which still await the research of future scholars."

¹² Pappe, *History*, 138; the statistics of Montefiore are similar: Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 468, 474.

¹³ Pappe, *History*, 140; also referred to in the Kairos document, 3.3.3., 10. In what could be seen as a conciliatory gesture, Ateek states that it was not the creation of Israel but the effect on the Palestinian people which was the Nakba (sic), implying the way that it was done: Ateek, *Cry for Reconciliation*, xiv.

Life in Nazareth during the ensuing months was difficult. Palestinians flooded the city– either fleeing or expelled from neighbouring towns and villages...On the whole, our family was more fortunate than many others. None of us was killed. We did not stay in refugee camps.

...The wounds of that war were not only physical; the psychological agonies were at times greater. Borders were closed and many families were divided on different sides of the armistice lines...Fear, uncertainty, anxiety, anger, bitterness– all these became part of the life of the humiliated and demoralized Palestinian community.¹⁴

Jewish soldiers occupied Nazareth and military law brought restrictions such as permits being necessary to travel from one place to another.¹⁵ Strangely, on Israel's ten year Independence Day, Israeli Arabs were allowed to travel freely for one day. Ateek's family were able to visit Beisan to see the destruction of some homes and the Israeli Jewish occupation of others, including their own.¹⁶ Ateek later studied in the United States and became an Episcopalian (Anglican) priest. His story continues in his theology.

Ateek's 1989 book introduces 'a Palestinian theology of liberation',¹⁷ with which his name has become associated,¹⁸ via the recent history of Israel-Palestine.¹⁹ His comments on the political and historical background of this troubled land give details of the continuing situation and are also a comment on the nature of history writing in general.

It has become almost impossible to be objective about the Arab-Israeli conflict. Every proponent claims objectivity, yet this is achieved only up to a certain point. Beyond that point, objectivity is clouded by the emotions of the proponents and their convictions that are based on varying interpretations and appropriations of facts.²⁰

In his foreword to his *A History of Modern Palestine*, Pappé also makes a comment on the nature of history and the way the history of recent events has been told. In a tightly written short piece he pays tribute to the:

Very alert and eager Palestinian and Jewish students (who) demanded...a narrative of their country's history that did not repeat the known versions of the two conflicting parties; one that respected the other...*and above all was more hopeful about the future.*²¹

In an acknowledgement of the elusiveness of hope Pappé continues: "I began writing the book in the twilight of the Oslo Agreement and found it difficult to comply with the last

¹⁴ Ateek, *Justice*, 11.

¹⁵ Ateek, *Justice*, 12.

¹⁶ Ateek, *Justice*, 12.

¹⁷ As earlier indicated, this is the sub-title of Ateek's *Justice* book.

¹⁸ Many sources: eg. Laura C. Robson, "Palestinian liberation theology, Muslim-Christian relations and Arab-Israeli conflict," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 21:1 (2010): 40.

¹⁹ This is Ateek's preferred term in both *Justice* and *Cry for Reconciliation*.

²⁰ Ateek, *Justice*, 18-19. In an interesting reflection of this historiographical point are the selected quotations from Golda Meir given by Ateek (*Justice*, 36-7), and by the Jewish writer, Montefiore (*Jerusalem*, 492).

²¹ Pappé, *History*, xix (my italics).

request”.²² He realised, however, that there had been signs of hope, ironically from other historians.

...industrious researchers had already provided us with new perspectives on Palestine, but they were never presented in one narrative. What these novel approaches had in common was that they attempted to tell the story of the people and the land, and not just that of high politics, dogmatic ideologies or rehearsed national narratives.²³

Pappe’s book, written from a “humanist not a nationalist” perspective, seeks to be “a narrative of those in Palestine who were brutalized and victimised by human follies well known from other parts of the world.”²⁴ In summary, he follows the various political structures and the conditions of the Palestinians in the particular periods. To emphasise the interplay of history and theology in this context, I will include only those events which are cited by Ateek or Raheb. Pappé covers the period from the British mandate to the United Nations-led Declaration of the State of Israel.²⁵ The link between the Holocaust and support for the modern state of Israel is noted by most writers.²⁶ There were internal divisions within Palestinian politics but gradually the Palestinian Liberation Organisation gained ascendancy.²⁷ The six day war in 1967 led to military occupation of Palestinian territories which has been met with various forms of resistance, including the first and second intifada.²⁸ Many peace initiatives have failed and Jewish settlement in the occupied territories continues.²⁹ This outline aims to establish the past and continuing injustices suffered by the Palestinians which a theology based on justice seeks to encompass.

For the third part of this history section I will turn to the writings of Mitri Raheb. His 2004 book, *Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble*, again gives his own experience as a window into the wider Palestinian experience of occupation. A pastor at the Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, he begins the book with an account of when his home and church had been subject to invasion, including heavy bombardment from tanks and guns, part of the Israeli military response to a suicide bombing in Jerusalem in particular

²² Pappé, *History*, xix.

²³ Pappé, *History*, xix. The movement towards greater truth telling by Israeli historians was referred to by Miko Peled: Miko Peled, “Uncovering the Myth of the Zionist State” (address to Australians for Justice and Peace in Palestine, Canberra, September 22, 2011).

²⁴ Both quotations from Pappé, *History*, xix. Pappé further delineates the nature of historiographical writing in his comments on rewriting, or salvaging, history that may have been “erased and forgotten” (xix), and in his section, *Deconstructing the Emergence of Modern Palestine* (5-7).

²⁵ Pappé, *History*, 72-140; Ateek, *Justice*, 22-30.

²⁶ Eg. Pappé, *History*, 123, 140; Ateek, *Justice*, 104; Mitri Raheb, *Bethlehem Besieged: Stories of Hope in Times of Trouble* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 88.

²⁷ Pappé, *History*, 166-90; Ateek, *Justice*, 39-42.

²⁸ Pappé, *History*, Ch 6; Ateek, *Justice*, 39-49. The connection between the intifada and the beginnings of the Palestinian liberation theology is cited frequently. Eg Ateek, *Cry for Reconciliation*, 9. See also Mitri Raheb, “Law, Power, Justice, and the Bible,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S Ateek, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marc H. Ellis (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 97.

²⁹ Eg. Oslo Accords: Pappé, *History*, 240-5; Raheb, *Palestinian Christian*, 34-6. The extension of settlements is noted by many. See Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 511. Other aspects of injustice such as army and settler violence and unequal water distribution cannot be further discussed here: Peled, September 22, 2011.

and the second intifada in general.³⁰ Palestinian gunmen took refuge in the (Catholic) Church of the Nativity and the subsequent siege finally ended weeks later after US diplomatic intervention.³¹ After this account Raheb comments on the realised inevitability of what had happened. “Most of the Palestinian towns had been invaded by Israel, and we knew that it was only a matter of days until the Israeli troops would also invade Bethlehem.”³²

These events were terrifying and dramatic but also significant are other features of occupation such as four months of curfew, virtual house arrest, in 2002, and beatings, humiliations and even torture to those breaking the curfew.³³ “The thirty-five-year occupation has been very long and feels endless. The day of freedom and dignity seems very far away.”³⁴ Raheb gives details of how the building of walls, the checkpoints, permits (which may or may not be granted) and travel restrictions impinge on the daily lives of Palestinians, sometimes tragically.³⁵ Such injustices are borne in various ways: some emigrate; “others are radicalised by such treatment”; and Christians like Raheb seek to, still, find Christ in Palestine.³⁶

Palestinian theology has as its setting the historical situation outlined. It must be stated that although there is a call for justice, it is not a simple matter of reversal of the above injustices.³⁷ An end to occupation of the Palestinian territories would be one minimal demand. The *Kairos* document makes specific mention of an end to occupation and recognition of a Palestinian state.³⁸ It will be seen that Ateek holds up a vision of sharing the land with justice and peace. This is very much part of Palestinian theology.

2. A theology of the Palestinian people in the land of Palestine and Israel

The heading here intentionally mirrors that of the history section of this essay. This has the purpose of representing that this Palestinian theology is grounded in the experience of the people, historically situated in this land. As a way of looking at the significance of the theology in the present, it will be helpful to begin with the *Kairos* document of 2009, titled *A Moment of Truth*. This document is a powerful representation of different Christian communities in Palestine together bringing, “A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering”.³⁹ It is this suffering that then brings a fragility to the document: can

³⁰ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 3-4, 7. These events took place in April, 2002. The second intifada began in Sept 2000: Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 113.

³¹ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 9.

³² Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 35.

³³ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 46-7.

³⁴ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 48.

³⁵ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 17.

³⁶ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, Chapters 9, 12; quotation from 83.

³⁷ Eg. Ateek writes that although the State of Israel was “built on the ashes of other people’s homes...it has gradually come to be accepted by the Palestinians”: Ateek, *Justice*, 177. Ateek’s position is acknowledged: Pleins, 143.

³⁸ *Kairos* document, 3-4. The term “liberation from occupation” is used (4). The document does not directly label its theology contextual or liberation.

³⁹ *Kairos* document, 1. Thirteen Patriarchs and heads of Churches signed the document and other Christian leaders were involved in its composition, Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb among them: *Kairos* document, 2, 4.

one dare to hope? The intertextuality is made clear at the beginning as an earlier document is acknowledged:

We hope that it will be welcomed positively and will receive strong support, as was the South Africa *Kairos* document launched in 1985, which, at that time proved to be a tool in the struggle against oppression and occupation.⁴⁰

Ateek's reference to the South Africa document in his 1989 work is significant.⁴¹ He saw the task as one of developing a liberation theology in a Palestinian context and *Kairos Palestine* represents that specific context.⁴² Over the last two decades, Ateek and others have sought to give a theological basis for the Palestinian Christians to look to the future with more hope than their present situation provided.

Justice and only justice

These words come from the title of Ateek's 1989 book, and are in turn a quotation from Deuteronomy. "Justice, and only justice, you shall follow that you may inherit the land which the Lord your God gives you." (Deut 16.20). They proclaim the priority of justice.⁴³ As has been said many times in this and other discourses, there can be no peace without justice.⁴⁴ The first section of the ten sections of the *Kairos* document is about the need for justice. It is not titled justice but rather *The Reality on the Ground* and gives details, many of which have been outlined above, of past injustices which still continue.⁴⁵ These include: the Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories (1.1.2); refugees and the conditions in which they live (1.1.6); and discrimination against Palestinians living within Israel. Examples of unjust situations in the recent past and present include the separation wall on Palestinian territory and the "cruel war" against Gaza in December 2008– January 2009 and the continuing blockade (1.1.1); as well as the military checkpoints (1.1.3). It can be seen that those associated with this document do not wish it to be 'merely theological' in the narrow sense of the word, but rather reflect a theology that opens its eyes to present reality.

The *Kairos* document has not been without its critics. Amy-Jill Levine, a respected Jewish New Testament scholar and Professor is one such critic. Her short critique, *Un-Christian responses to the Middle East*,⁴⁶ is almost scathing for the first half and then softens in tone and speaks of joint peace initiatives from within her own context as an activist for peace.⁴⁷ Levine is attempting to look at 'both sides', a familiar but fitting phrase, but her accusations can be seen to be neither convincing nor fair.

⁴⁰ *Kairos* document, 3: *Kairos*, Greek, time, reflecting that now is the time for justice.

⁴¹ Ateek, *Justice*, 137-8.

⁴² The *Kairos* document does not directly label its theology contextual or liberation.

⁴³ Ateek briefly discusses other readings for the repetition and sees the double reference as able to include both the Jewish people and the Palestinians: Ateek, *Justice*, 177, 212. Raheb also uses the phrase, *Justice, nothing but justice*, and discusses the issue: Raheb, *Palestinian Christian*, 26.

⁴⁴ References to the inseparability of peace and justice in the Palestinian context include Ateek, *Justice*, 140.

⁴⁵ *Kairos* document, 5-7.

⁴⁶ Amy-Jill Levine, "Un-Christian Responses to the Middle East," *ABC Religion and Ethics* (21 July, 2010), 1-3.

⁴⁷ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 2. "Despite the fact that I write as a supporter of Americans for Peace Now, a US group affiliated with the Israeli group Shalom Achshav..." More details are given on the Israeli group, 3.

Levine begins: “That the State of Israel violates the human rights of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank is not in doubt, or at least should not be.”⁴⁸ That is a firm beginning and she then widens the net both to show injustices ‘on the other side’ and also to state that it is attitudes that are at stake.

Those who would justify as morally appropriate any action Israel takes, from permitting the seizure of Palestinian lands by settlers to permitting the daily abuse of Palestinians at checkpoints, are just as much in error as those who would justify Hamas’s goal of wiping Israel off the map or who find the blowing up of Israeli’s pizza restaurants to be permissible resistance.⁴⁹

Before addressing the *Kairos* document directly Levine accuses “church-based peace activists” of possible anti-Semitism.⁵⁰ This is not fair in either its language or its message. Levine has just spoken of “polarizing language” and her own wording is just that. To critique the policies of modern Israel in the way theologians have done in the document is not the same as being anti-Semitic.

Even more significantly Levine seems to be in error in representing the aims of Palestinian theology as stated within the document. She writes,

...when “A Moment of Truth” insists that the “Israeli occupation of Palestinian land is a sin against God” and condemns the “clear apartheid” faced by the Palestinian people “for more than six decades”– that is, since 1948– it denies Israel both theological and political legitimacy.⁵¹

Levine here seems to be accusing those who wrote the document of denying Israel any land but this is to misrepresent their position. It is the Israeli occupation only of the Palestinian territories that must end. “This document puts forward ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land ...the solution that will lead to a just and lasting peace with the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.”⁵²

There are those within the Palestinian political structures who would go further but the document does not hold their position. Levine finishes this section with a barb: “Apparently, Palestinian national hopes are theologically justified; Jewish ones, in existence for two millenia, are merely manifestations of colonialist hegemony and European guilt.”⁵³

Having made these and other accusations, Levine offers an alternative to the theologians.

⁴⁸ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 1.

⁴⁹ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 1.

⁵⁰ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 1, 2.

⁵¹ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 1-2.

⁵² Kairos document, 3.

⁵³ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 2.

It would be far more constructive to let specific abuses regarding settlers illegally seizing Palestinian lands, the hardships created by the wall and the blockade, and so on, be explicitly named.⁵⁴

This, too, is unfair. The document has specifically cited these injustices, as detailed above. In what sense is Levine suggesting ‘explicit naming’? I do not feel she is denying such charges (though she could be hinting at their scale) but any amount of ‘listing’ or publicity has not worked to change Israeli Government policy. Levine does proceed to offer more constructive proposals.

Israel needs to stop permitting settlements; Palestinians need to stop sending rockets into Israeli territory; Israel needs to open the Gaza blockade and help the Palestinians develop their own economy; Hamas needs to change its charter and its goal.⁵⁵

These goals all lie within the letter or the spirit of the *Kairos* document, as does the “two-state solution”⁵⁶ referred to by Levine. Any theology should not place itself above critique but that critique should be done with fairness and integrity. Overall the document has been well-received by many churches.⁵⁷

Ateek and Raheb have both argued for justice for the Palestinian people; here Ateek will be the spokesperson.⁵⁸ Ateek engages with those groups such as Jewish and Christian Zionists and certain Evangelical Christians who use the concept of God’s returning the people of Israel to the Promised Land.⁵⁹ Ateek’s refutation of such thinking becomes part of the theology, giving a different view of both God and the land. A Palestinian theology for the victims of injustice must offer many things. It must offer a concept of God as inclusive in

⁵⁴ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 2. Raheb tells of his own experience with the death of his father-in-law after intransigence by Israeli guards at a checkpoint to enter part of Jerusalem meant medical treatment was delayed: Raheb, *Bethlehem*, Ch 7.

⁵⁵ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 3.

⁵⁶ Levine, *Un-Christian responses*, 3; *Kairos* document, 3.

⁵⁷ See Responses: <http://www.kairospalestine.ps>. Most responses are positive, such as that of Desmond Tutu: Desmond Tutu, “Statement to be read out in Bethlehem on 11 December 2009”. One article from the *Jerusalem Post* is less so but does acknowledge that the Kairos document “wholeheartedly embraced the moderate Palestinian political line (as opposed to Hamas)”: Rabbi Abraham Cooper, quoted in J.P. February 21, 2010.

⁵⁸ Raheb’s wording echoes many of Ateek’s statements, particularly in Raheb’s 1995 book: Mitri Raheb, *I Am a Palestinian Christian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Eg “The cry for justice...Justice, Nothing but Justice”, 26; also 26—36, 43-6. Raheb uses the term, contextual theology, rather than the liberation one but the difference seems one of emphasis only. Raheb, for example, speaks of “too much politics and too little care for the people”: <http://www.brightstarsbethlehem.org>, youtube video. Ateek, rather, welcomes peace gatherings as a chance to lift up “the prophetic voice”, proclaiming that “the occupation is evil”: <http://www.sabeel.org>, youtube video, Boston 2007. Samuel Kuruvilla’s thesis is that the difference between the two is real and further, that Raheb’s is more suited to the Palestinian situation; Samuel Jacob Kuruvilla, “Radical Christianity in the Holy Land: A Comparative Study of Liberation and Contextual Theology in Palestine-Israel” (PhD diss., University of Exeter, 2009), abstract. My initial reading would see the two approaches as more similar than different, both having a valid place.

⁵⁹ The discussion on Jewish and Christian Zionism here is brief but such groups are widely acknowledged. See Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 501-2. Ateek cites well-known theologians such as Paul van Buren: Ateek, *Justice*, 55, 63. Ateek also has a fuller discussion in his recent book: Ateek, *Cry for Reconciliation*, 78-91.

character,⁶⁰ as having even a partiality toward the powerless and the oppressed.⁶¹ It must offer the possibility of political responsibility, an acknowledgement of human rights and a striving for “a state which is based on justice”.⁶² For Ateek does not refrain from advocating the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel. “There is no other alternative offering real justice, and a good measure of peace and stability.”⁶³

Faith– in which God?

In questioning the views of the Christian Zionists, Ateek moves to centre stage the question of God. He quotes van Buren’s view on the rightness of Israel being created as part of “the history of God with His people”.⁶⁴

Such naivety betrays a real misunderstanding of God and of history. Does God act in a vacuum with Israel, as if there were no nations living around it? Does God act with total disregard for morality? About which God is van Buren writing?⁶⁵

As he lays the ‘cornerstone’ of this theology, it is significant that of the two major issues which he sees, the first one is justice. The second is the Bible.⁶⁶ His discussion of the elements within the issue of the Bible is wide-ranging and includes: the misuse of the Bible to support injustice rather than justice;⁶⁷ the discarding of the Old Testament by some Palestinian Christians because of what it is taken to show;⁶⁸ and significantly a way forward to a new central biblical hermeneutic of Jesus Christ himself. In a few sentences Ateek shows what is needed and then supplies that need.

The only bridge between the Bible and people is theology. It must be a theology that is biblically sound; a theology that liberates; a theology that will contextualise and interpret while remaining faithful to the heart of the biblical message.⁶⁹

...For the Christian, to talk about the knowledge of God is to talk about knowing God through Christ...the *Word* of God incarnate in Jesus the Christ interprets the *word* of God in the Bible.⁷⁰

The application of the new hermeneutic will lead to new questions being asked of the ‘difficult passages’ in the Bible.

⁶⁰ Ateek, *Justice*, 110, 130.

⁶¹ Ateek, *Justice*, 132, including a quotation from Barth.

⁶² Ateek, *Justice*, 133-4.

⁶³ Ateek, *Justice*, 166. Twenty years later Ateek is still affirming this view. The political position of the Sabeel Centre is that of an independent Palestinian state within the pre-1967 borders: <http://www.sabeel.org>. The issues are complex, however, and Ateek writes further on the two-state solution: Ateek, *Cry for Reconciliation*, 165-177.

⁶⁴ Ateek, *Justice*, 64.

⁶⁵ Ateek, *Justice*, 64.

⁶⁶ Ateek, *Justice*, 74-5.

⁶⁷ Ateek, *Justice*, 75-7.

⁶⁸ Ateek, *Justice*, 77-9.

⁶⁹ Ateek, *Justice*, 78.

⁷⁰ Ateek, *Justice*, 80.

Does this fit the picture I have of God that Jesus has revealed to me? Does it match the character of God who I have come to know through Jesus Christ? If it does, then that passage is valid and authoritative. If not, then I cannot accept its validity or authority... Liberation comes through the application and use of this hermeneutical key.⁷¹

Ateek reminds the reader that certain passages in the Bible remain valuable pedagogically without imposing “particular doctrinal views”.⁷² Ateek concludes the chapter with further thoughts on the character of God and how this is linked to views of the land.

The tragedy of many Zionists today is that they have locked themselves into this nationalist concept of God.⁷³

...I have no doubt that the universalist understanding of God– developed in spite of the resistance that it encountered– is the truer concept. I say this not because it suits my purpose as a Palestinian, but because it is the only worthy concept of God- the true God.⁷⁴

Such a view of God leads to a vision of sharing the land, of recognising its wider significance for both peoples.⁷⁵ Ateek writes, “As part of the theology of liberation for Palestinians, I would like to call attention to the significance of the land for its Christian population.”⁷⁶ The land of Palestine is associated with the incarnation in a special way and also with Jesus’ call, as the ‘Prince of Peace’, to peacemaking. In Matthew’s words of Jesus, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons [and daughters] of God.”⁷⁷

In setting forth its particular theology, in “a word of faith”, the *Kairos* document first all establishes the starting point of its theology. “We believe in one God, a good and just God.”⁷⁸ The first part of the section then establishes the Trinitarian nature of the theology and then follows, significantly, a discussion of scripture which places the emphasis on interpretation of the living word rather than on “letters of stone”.⁷⁹ This and the next part referring to “certain theologians in the West (who) try to attach a biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of our rights”, is once again a refutation of those groups who advocate Jewish occupation of the land of Israel.⁸⁰ The section ends with a theological statement showing that element of context characteristic of this theology.

⁷¹ Ateek, *Justice*, 82. Further discussion of liberation biblical hermeneutics, such as in the work of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza lies outside the scope of this essay but Ateek’s discussion fits within this discourse. See Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 104. See also Raheb, *Palestinian Christian*, 59-64.

⁷² Ateek, *Justice*, 83.

⁷³ Ateek, *Justice*, 109.

⁷⁴ Ateek, *Justice*, 110.

⁷⁵ As cited, Ateek’s particular model involves a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel, in a federation, 166, 172, 174.

⁷⁶ Ateek, *Justice*, 112.

⁷⁷ Ateek, *Justice*, 113-114; Matt 5:9.

⁷⁸ *Kairos* document, 7 (Section 2).

⁷⁹ *Kairos* document, 7-8, quotation from 2.2.2.

⁸⁰ *Kairos* document, 8, 2.3.3. As Ateek has cited, referring to van Buren in particular, biblical Israel and modern Israel are blended: Ateek, *Justice*, 63.

We also declare that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land ...distorts the image of God in the Israeli who has become an occupier just as it distorts this image in the Palestinian living under occupation.⁸¹

Hope– or “the absence of hope”?⁸²

Mitri Raheb will here be the spokesperson for that element of hope, against such impediments to hope, within Palestinian theology. Raheb echoes Ateek’s words that hope must be “an active and dynamic hope”.⁸³

Waiting, being passive, and feeling optimistic about the future– these are false hope. True hope is active: it is about developing a strategy for action, for work, for getting engaged and involved.⁸⁴

There will be setbacks. The bombardment of Bethlehem, with which his book begins, leads Raheb to write, “Our compound, which had been a beacon of hope for many, became after the invasion a sign of hopelessness and despair”.⁸⁵ But rebuilding brings hope to the forefront again.⁸⁶

In the last chapter of *Bethlehem Besieged*, Raheb concludes his “stories of hope in times of trouble” with a rhetorical question: “building walls or planting olive trees?” He writes of how the realities of the occupation and a failure of diplomacy led to evaporation of hope (“Hope was assassinated”)⁸⁷ but also of how hope is being wrested back. This kind of hope will encompass non-violent resistance, breaking the vicious cycle of violence and victims, and a vision of peaceful coexistence.⁸⁸ The book ends with an extended metaphor grounded in the Palestinian land.

Rather, our only hopeful vision is to go out today into our garden into our society, and plant olive trees...If we plant a tree today, there will be shade for the children to play in, there will be oil to heal the wounds, and there will be olive branches to wave when peace arrives.⁸⁹

The repetition within the *Kairos* document of hope within an absence of hope,⁹⁰ shows that the nature of the hope envisaged is not the ordinary hope of people.

⁸¹ *Kairos* document, 9, 2.5.

⁸² *Kairos* document, 5, 16. See also: Karen Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths* (New York: Ballentine Books, 1996, 2005), 430; and Marc H. Ellis, “Between Jerusalem and Bethlehem: Reflections on the Western Ecumenical Dialogue,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S Ateek, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marc H. Ellis (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 135. Ellis, who is Jewish, was a co-editor of the book.

⁸³ Ateek, *Justice*, 134

⁸⁴ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 153.

⁸⁵ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 15.

⁸⁶ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 16.

⁸⁷ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 151.

⁸⁸ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 154-6

⁸⁹ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 157.

⁹⁰ *Kairos* document, 5, 9, 16.

Hope within us means first and foremost our faith in God and secondly, our expectation, despite everything for a better future. Thirdly, it means not chasing after illusions. ...Hope is the capacity to see God in the midst of trouble and to be co-workers with the Holy Spirit.⁹¹

Local centres of theology, “with a religious and social character”, are cited as “signs of hope”.⁹² The Sabeel Centre in Jerusalem was established by Ateek in the early 1990s and has developed extensive programs.⁹³ The International Centre of Bethlehem with its *Bright Stars* program seeks to minister within the lives of children in Bethlehem.⁹⁴

Hate? Or Love?

It is hard not to continue quoting from Mitri Raheb.⁹⁵ There are two passages in particular from *Bethlehem Besieged* with which I will begin this focus on the nature of love within Palestinian theology. Raheb tells of his encounter in his office with an Israeli military unit during the invasion described at the beginning of the book. After he changed from speaking in Hebrew and English, to speaking in Arabic in answering a phone call, attitudes worsened, but even more so when Raheb spoke these words: “The real wise person is he who can transform his enemy into a neighbour, and not his neighbour into an enemy.”⁹⁶ As he says, “I wanted to penetrate to their humanity and, at the same time, I wanted to challenge them to see my humanity.”⁹⁷

Being a pastor, Raheb interprets his role as bringing the word of God into the context of his congregation. His 2002 Easter Sunday sermon, a few days before the invasion, entered into dialogue with the psalmist.

Though an army encamp against me,
my heart shall not fear;
though war rise up against me,
yet I will be confident. (Ps 27:3)

No, you author of this psalm. We fear war...We have proved to one another that our Palestinian youths are able to transform the Israeli coffee shops into tombs and the Israeli youth are able to transform our roads into garbage dumps.⁹⁸

There is then development of his thought. “Indeed, you author of this psalm, war will not scare us. Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The presence in the congregation that day of three Jewish Israeli peace activists gave an opportunity for an affirmation of love. After specific references to Palestinian and Jewish

⁹¹ Kairos document, 9.

⁹² Kairos document, 3.3.1.

⁹³ See <http://www.sabeel.org>

⁹⁴ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, Ch 13; also <http://www.brightstarsbethlehem.org>

⁹⁵ The focus here is on *Bethlehem Besieged* but Raheb’s earlier “Love your Enemy” chapter in *Palestinian Christian* is also apt and moving: Raheb, *Palestinian Christian*, 98-104.

⁹⁶ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 22.

⁹⁷ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 23.

⁹⁸ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 38-9.

gestures of peace, Raheb holds up the vision that when “two people (coexist) in peace with justice and dignity then love’s redeeming power (is) really at work”.⁹⁹

Raheb is one of the signatories to the *kairos* document and it is not surprising to see some of his thoughts reflected there, just a few years later. Under the heading *Love*, there is not only the scriptural basis of love but another sub-heading of *Resistance*.¹⁰⁰ The two are directly linked.

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
Matt 5:44 (4.1)

Love is the commandment of Christ our Lord to us and it includes both friends and enemies. This must be clear when we find ourselves in circumstances where we must resist evil of whatever kind. (4.2)

Love is seeing the face of God in every human being. (4.2.1)

But it is resistance with love as its logic. (4.2.3)

Either the cycle of violence that destroys both of us or peace that will benefit both.
(4.3)

And finally, in a later “word to our brothers and sisters” (Christian, Muslim and Jews), “The culture of love is the culture of accepting the other”. (5.4.3)¹⁰¹

Jerusalem

And when he drew near and saw the city he wept over it, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace!”(Luke 19:41-2)¹⁰²

The penultimate paragraph (9.5) of the *Kairos* document refers to Jerusalem as “the foundation of our vision and our entire life”.¹⁰³ The city is emblematic of the three monotheistic faiths and it would be expected that a Palestinian theological discourse would make reference to it. It is sufficient here to make two comments, political and then more specifically theological.

Firstly, such is the nature of the way the three monotheistic faiths, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, view this city and have historic places of worship there, that any permanent solution to the borders and sovereignty of Jerusalem must take these factors into account. Whether Jerusalem becomes an international city or part of Palestine (or Israel) with freedom of

⁹⁹ Raheb, *Bethlehem*, 41-3; quotations from 41, 42, 43.

¹⁰⁰ *Kairos* document, 11-13.

¹⁰¹ *Kairos* document, 13-14.

¹⁰² Heather Thomson, *The Things that Make for Peace* (Canberra: Barton Books, 2009), 6. I cite this reference to reflect Jesus’ words used in the current peace discourse, Thomson more generally, here specifically Jerusalem.

¹⁰³ *Kairos* document, 16.

access and worship guaranteed, or with partition within the city, the sensitivities of this city must be respected. It is this failure of respect, and the presence of its converse, extremism, that causes continuing conflict.

Simon Sebag Montefiore, in his detailed work, *Jerusalem*, writes on these issues¹⁰⁴ and, although it is history rather than theology that concerns him, he acknowledges the aspirations of the different groups. In contrast to the Palestinian theology within this exploration, he does not speak directly of the theme of justice but he gives details which could fit within the justice discourse.¹⁰⁵ Related to both structure and attitudes, is the issue of the continuing extension of settlements in the non-Israeli section of Jerusalem, in East Jerusalem. West Jerusalem exists as the capital of Israel,¹⁰⁶ but successive Israeli Governments have built dwellings for new Jewish settlers in East Jerusalem since the 1980s, as well as near other West Bank cities, including when peace negotiations were taking place.¹⁰⁷

Ateek, in a concise three pages, also sets out the parameters above and makes his own suggestion.¹⁰⁸ His “major premise”, as it was with the whole land, is still the sharing of the city, and the earlier concept of the “minor premise”, of a Palestinian state, would be changed to being one of unity rather than division.¹⁰⁹ The *Kairos* document acknowledges the “two peoples of three religions” who inhabit the city and calls for negotiations to centre on “the totality of Jerusalem”.¹¹⁰

The second issue is also related to attitudes but more a matter of acceptance of ‘the Other’ and recognition of humanity than one of structures. Montefiore notes, “When they are not in conflict, Jews, Christians and Muslims return to the ancient Jerusalem tradition of ostrichism- burying their heads in the sand and pretending The Others do not exist.”¹¹¹ The *Kairos* document holds up an alternate vision of Jerusalem. “She is the city to which God gave a particular importance in the history of humanity...where (all people) will meet in friendship and love in the presence of the One Unique God.”¹¹²

¹⁰⁴ Eg. Possible political structures for Jerusalem: Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 463, 467, 468, 474, 481, 482, 497, 498, Epilogue: 501-22.

¹⁰⁵ See Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 512. The “bureaucratic harassments” acknowledged lack the intensity of Raheb’s account, for example.

¹⁰⁶ Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 487, 497. Montefiore gives specific details about the Israeli encroachment into other parts of the city such as the Western Wall.

¹⁰⁷ Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 505-7. It is this building that has made Palestinians cynical about Israeli talk of peace.

¹⁰⁸ Ateek, *Justice*, 173-5. The suggestion of Jerusalem being a federal capital of a United States of the Holy Land has similarities to and differences from other solutions. Jerusalem would be the federal capital of Israel but not the national capital. Similarly, Palestine would choose another national capital. In the *Kairos* document, however, to which Ateek puts his name, Al-Quds is named as the desired capital. Ateek’s personal view is still, “Jerusalem cannot and should not be the exclusive claim of one nation or one religion”: Ateek, *Cry for Reconciliation*, 150.

¹⁰⁹ Ateek, *Justice*, 173.

¹¹⁰ *Kairos* document, 16.

¹¹¹ Montefiore, *Jerusalem*, 512.

¹¹² *Kairos* document, 16.

3. How has Palestinian theology been received?

Hearing from just two voices is limited but will give some insight into the different views about Palestinian theology.¹¹³ Laura Robson sees this “specifically Palestinian version of Christian liberation theology” as “one of the most significant, and most overlooked, attempts to remake the triangular relationship between Christianity, Islam and Zionism in Palestine/Israel.”¹¹⁴ Not totally overlooked, however, as she notes that certain elements of biblical exegesis within the theology have “aroused anger, and even fury, from commentators”, citing one writer and then refutation of his arguments by others;¹¹⁵ “...the relatively meagre scholarship on Palestinian liberation theology has been mired in political controversy.”¹¹⁶ Robson affirms the depth and “intellectual reach” of the theology citing key figures who would position themselves within it, or support its premises such as Hanan Ashrawi, Edward Said, Desmond Tutu, Rowan Williams and Rosemary Radford Ruether.¹¹⁷ She notes that some Palestinian theologians use the term contextual theology for their approach, “because of this emphasis on historical context”, while others use the liberation term but she does not develop this point.¹¹⁸

Robson gives a comprehensive overview of the theology including its sources, such as the liberation theology of Gutierrez, and the theological views of its protagonists, Ateek and Raheb. So too does another critic, Adam Gregerman. He refers to Palestinian liberation theology and quotes accurately from Ateek, Raheb and Ruether but he rejects the whole enterprise because, echoing Levine, of its alleged anti-semitism. Gregerman’s point about the use of biblical texts by the Palestinian Christian theologians is valid but the point of departure is that he sees as anti-semitic the application of such texts as applying to modern Israel.¹¹⁹ He critiques the use of the Exodus story. Raheb quotes from one of his students saying that the Exodus story is the Palestinian story and Gregerman sees this as writing the Jews out of their own story.¹²⁰ Ateek, however, knowing the way the story has been viewed by Jewish and Christian Zionists, has directly moved away from its use within his theology.¹²¹ Both Robson and Gregerman note the way the theology has been well-received in many Protestant churches, though Gregerman is critical of this.¹²²

¹¹³ Responses to the *Kairos* document in particular have been surveyed.

¹¹⁴ Robson, 39.

¹¹⁵ Robson, note, 48-9.

¹¹⁶ Robson, note, 49.

¹¹⁷ Robson, 47. See Hanan Ashrawi, “The Intifada: Political Analysis,” in *Faith and the Intifada: Palestinian Christian Voices*, ed. Naim S Ateek, Rosemary Radford Ruether and Marc H. Ellis (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 9-17. Desmond Tutu wrote a foreword for Ateek’s *Cry for Reconciliation* and was a speaker, with Ateek, at a Sabeel conference, Boston, 2007: <http://www.sabeel.org>. Rosemary Radford Ruether has written her own books on this theology as well as writing a foreword for both Ateek’s *Justice* and Raheb’s *Palestinian Christian*.

¹¹⁸ Robson, note, 49.

¹¹⁹ Adam Gregerman, “Old wine in new bottles: liberation theology and the Israeli- Palestinian conflict,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41: 3-4 (2004): 340. The issue of anti-semitism and the frequent use of the biblical texts including the universalist stance of the Jonah story cannot be further discussed here.

¹²⁰ Gregerman, 335, citing Raheb, *Palestinian Christian*, 88. The Exodus is a common motif within various liberation theologies: Pleins, 133, 138. Raheb uses it earlier: Raheb, *Faith and the Intifada*, 99.

¹²¹ Ateek, *Justice*, 86: cited by Robson, 42.

¹²² See the Australian Heads of Churches Statement on Palestine and Israel which speaks of the occupation and need for peace to benefit both Palestinians and Israelis: <http://www.vss.org.au>. Also the World Council of

Conclusion

Palestinian theology cannot be 'all things to all people'. There are critics without but relative unity within. What it does is to clearly delineate the parameters within which Palestinian Christians have a theological basis for faith, hope and love in their troubled land. Robson's overview is in line with the observations within this essay. The sources of the theology lie in the biblical texts, other models of liberation theology and the history of the indigenous Middle Eastern churches. It is a theology which has resisted the violence of other models (such as Gutierrez), affirming the stance of non-violent resistance since the days of the first intifada and repositioning Palestinian Christianity to be closer to the Palestinian Muslim community.¹²³ It is a theology both historical and political. The discourse includes a call for justice, the ending of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory and the recognition of a Palestinian state, as well as continuing the ministry of Jesus in preaching, teaching and healing. It involves a "care for the *polis*", not leaving all the peacemaking to the politicians but bringing faith, hope and love to the lives of the Palestinian people.¹²⁴

Churches website which speaks of occupation and various forms of extremism and violence:
<http://www.oikoumene.org>. See Gregerman, 314.

¹²³ Robson, 44.

¹²⁴ Raheb, filmed address, Youtube video: <http://www.brightstarsbethlehem.org>

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