

# Tracing the 'Kairos' Trajectory from South Africa (1985) to Palestine (2009): Discerning Continuities and Differences

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## ABSTRACT

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This article traces the lines of connection and difference stretching from the South African *Kairos Document*, through the many 'kairos' documents inspired by it, to *Kairos Palestine*. The two elements of this 'kairos' trajectory that are analysed are, firstly, the processes that generated a 'kairos' document and, secondly, the biblical hermeneutics inherent in a 'kairos' document.

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## Introduction

The embodied theologies of ordinary South Africans struggling against apartheid called forth a process and a document that has reverberated around the world. *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Churches* has left an indelible trail, with a long line of initiatives and documents claiming continuity with this South African theological proclamation.

In this article I will trace and analyse how our South African 'kairos' document has been taken up by a range of other contexts of struggle. More importantly, I will reflect on what some of the distinctive features of *The Kairos Document* might be. I will use an intertextual analysis to highlight these distinctive features, analysing each in the line of 'kairos' documents that stretches from the South African *Kairos Document*, the first 'kairos' document, to the Palestinian 'kairos' document, the most recent in the 'kairos' trajectory.

My primary dialogue partner in discerning what is distinctive about the South African *Kairos Document* will be the most recent 'kairos' document, produced by Christian Palestinians and published in late 2009, under the layered title, *A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian*

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*Suffering: Kairos Palestine*.<sup>1</sup> But I will examine each of the others in-between, attempting to discern lines of connection and difference.

## Theological Process

Immediately upon reading *Kairos Palestine* the link with the South African *Kairos Document* is apparent.<sup>2</sup> The first sub-heading of *The Kairos Document* is "The Moment of Truth",<sup>3</sup> and the primary title of *Kairos Palestine* is *A Moment of Truth*.<sup>4</sup> The use of the indefinite article and the same nominal phrase here clearly signals this document's acknowledgment of an association with the South African *Kairos Document*. The Palestinian 'kairos' document offers another clear connection with the South African *Kairos Document* at the foot of its title page, with the tertiary level title *Kairos Palestine*.<sup>5</sup>

In-between these two South African derived titles is a distinctively different title: *A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering*.<sup>6</sup> It is this title that provides the shape to *Kairos Palestine*. However, in the electronic version that is posted on the Kairos Palestine website, the title page and the body of the document are interrupted by what appears to be a later addition, a statement by "the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem", hearing and supporting "the cry of hope that our children have launched in these difficult times that we still experience in this Holy Land".<sup>7</sup> These church leaders are not the authors of *Kairos*

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- 1 My focus will be on the document in its English translation, and will reflect on the processes that produced it only in so far as these processes are explained in the document and on the *Kairos Palestine* website. Others more familiar with the Palestinian context will no doubt engage with how the document came to its final form and the particular nuances of its Arabic original.
  - 2 What was published under the title *The Kairos Document* (with the definite article) is often referred to as the *Kairos Document* (without the definite article). I will use these titles interchangeably.
  - 3 The Kairos Theologians, *Challenge to the Church: The Kairos Document: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Braamfontein: The Kairos Theologians, 1985), 1; Gary S.D. Leonard, ed., *The Kairos Documents*, Kairos: The Moment of Truth: "The Time Has Come. The Moment of Truth Has Arrived." (Pietermaritzburg: Ujamaa Centre, 2011), 1. The various 'kairos' documents that will be discussed are not readily available to most readers, so the Ujamaa Centre has commissioned Gary Leonard to compile and edit the full collection as part of the Ujamaa Centre's 21<sup>st</sup> Anniversary. I will cite this collected edition throughout this article. This collected edition is available on the Ujamaa website: <http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/consultation/kairosdocs.aspx>
  - 4 Palestine Kairos, "A Moment of Truth: A Word of Faith, Hope and Love from the Heart of Palestinian Suffering: Kairos Palestine," (www.kairos-palestine.ps 2009, 2009), <http://www.kairos-palestine.ps/sites/default/Documents/English.pdf>; Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 287.
  - 5 "Kairos Palestine"; Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 287. The only direct reference to South Africa is rather oblique; see §4.2.6, 299.
  - 6 "Kairos Palestine"; Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 287.
  - 7 "Kairos Palestine".

*Palestine*, but they are given a position of prominence in the document, as they bestow their blessing on those who did 'author' the document, their "children".

Unlike the South African *Kairos Document*, the 'authors' or processes that produced *Kairos Palestine* are effaced from the document. For *The Kairos Document*, the 'authorship' of the document was collaborative, and included both formally trained and ordinary theologians. Albert Nolan describes the process as follows. "The *Kairos Document* was an initiative of the Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) in Johannesburg. However, it was not planned or foreseen by the staff of ICT. It simply happened as a result of ICT's method of doing theology." Nolan then goes on to explain more fully, saying that the ICT "does not teach theology; it simply enables people to do their own theological reflection upon their own praxis and experience. The staff of ICT are active in bringing Christians together, facilitating discussion and action, recording what people say, and doing whatever research may be required to support the reflections, arguments and actions of the people."<sup>8</sup> Using this method, two ICT staff members brought together a group of about ten interested people in Soweto, "one Saturday morning in July 1985 to reflect upon South Africa's latest crisis, the recently declared State of Emergency. As usual", Nolan explains, "it was thought that this meeting might lead to a plan of action which might involve some more Christians. Nobody was thinking about a theological document or anything like that."<sup>9</sup> But the follow-up meeting "was more animated and fruitful than usual", and so more meetings were held and more people became involved. As part of their contribution ICT staff "were given assignments", such as doing biblical research into texts like Romans 13, a favourite passage of the apartheid regime and most South African churches and so prominent in the public realm.<sup>10</sup>

It was this collaboration of ordinary township Christians and ICT staff, with some formal theological training, that produced *The Kairos Document*. As Nolan explains, "Minutes were taken at these meetings, and the insights of the participants and the research done by the staff and others were collated into a document", which was then "amended again and again with a view to the publication of a pamphlet". But then, continues Nolan, "someone suggested that it should become a document or statement signed by all the participants, as well as others from around the country, as a challenge to the churches *from below*".<sup>11</sup>

And that indeed is what it became: theology from below. The seriousness of the crisis together with the anger and frustration of the people, motivated the participants to speak

8 Albert Nolan, "Kairos Theology", in *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives*, edited by John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio (Cape Town: David Philip, 1994), 212.

9 Nolan, "Kairos Theology", 213.

10 Nolan, "Kairos Theology", 213.

11 Nolan, "Kairos Theology", 213.

about what they believed and what they did not believe. The Institute [of Contextual Theology] as a facilitating rather than an authoritative body recorded what the participants said without any censorship or amendment. All the participants became what we later called 'the Kairos theologians'.<sup>12</sup>

This emphasis on process was not a product of hindsight, but was foregrounded from the outset. In the Preface to the first (1985) edition of *The Kairos Document* there is a clear emphasis on "the way the theological material was produced", outlining first the immediate context that produced the process that produced the document and then explaining in detail the process itself.<sup>13</sup> The process of drafting, reflecting, and redrafting was extensive, with more and more people becoming involved as the process developed. These included "theologians, ordinary Christians (lay theologians) and some Church leaders".<sup>14</sup> A "Working Committee" then expanded the participation in the document by taking it "various other Christian groupings throughout the country", stressing that this was "an open-ended document which will never be said to be final". Indeed, having being "inundated with comments, suggestions, and enthusiastic appreciation" throughout this referral process, "comments and recommendations" were still "flowing in" when the document was submitted for publication on the 13<sup>th</sup> September 1985.<sup>15</sup>

This collaborative, cross-sectoral process outlined above continued after the publication of *The Kairos Document*, as the "Preface" to the first publication promised it would. The preface to *The Revised Second Edition of The Kairos Document* reiterates the importance of the process that produced both the first and second editions, both in its own "Preface to the Revised Second Edition" and its re-publication of the "Preface" to the first edition. Furthermore, the "Preface to the Revised Second Edition" goes on to state that "Perhaps the most exciting and most important contribution of the Kairos Document has been its method or way of doing theology. Many Christians", it continues, "here and abroad are using the model or method of the Kairos Document [sic] to reflect on their own situation".<sup>16</sup>

Besides reminding readers that the *Revised Second Edition* "was developed in the same way as the first edition except that thousands of people have been involved in the process", this edition makes it clear that *The Kairos Document* is a product "not only ... of reflection and study but mostly in terms of involvement

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12 Nolan, "Kairos Theology", 213.

13 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 3.

14 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 3.

15 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 3-4.

16 The Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church: A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa*, Revised Second Edition ed. (Braamfontein: Skotaville, 1986), Preface; Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 32.

and action in the liberation struggle in South Africa".<sup>17</sup> Praxis is at the heart of the process that produced both editions of *The Kairos Document*.<sup>18</sup>

In a footnote (an innovation of the second edition) to the *Revised Second Edition*, the various dimensions of the process are interrogated more fully. This footnote is part of the explanation of why the section on prophetic theology, "Towards a prophetic theology", has been so extensively revised (whereas very little revision was done to other sections of the document). "Many readers", the footnote explains, "of the first edition suggested that the meaning of prophetic theology should be spelt out more clearly. The characteristics of prophetic theology", it continues, "that have been included in this second edition are a summary of discussions among Kairos theologians both before and immediately after the publication of the first edition".<sup>19</sup> And while the revised version of the section "Towards a Prophetic Theology" does just this, the remainder of the footnote goes on to analyse the difference between "prophetic theology" and "people's theology". I will quote this footnote in full, for we professional theologians need to be reminded regularly of this difference.

It should also be noted that there is a subtle difference between prophetic theology and people's theology. The Kairos Document itself, signed by theologians, ministers and other church workers, and addressed to all who bear the name Christian is a prophetic statement. But the process that led to the production of the document, the process of theological reflection and action in groups, the involvement of many different people in doing theology was an exercise in people's theology. The document is therefore pointing out two things: that our present Kairos challenges Church leaders and other Christians to speak out prophetically and that our present Kairos is challenging all of us to do theology together reflecting upon our experiences in working for justice and peace in South Africa and thereby developing a better theological understanding of our Kairos. The method that was used to produce the Kairos Document shows that theology is not the preserve of professional theologians, ministers and priests. Ordinary Christians can participate in theological reflection and should be encouraged to do so. When this people's theology is proclaimed to others to challenge and inspire them, it takes on the character of a prophetic theology.<sup>20</sup>

There can be no prophetic theology without there first being a people's theology, according to *The Kairos Document*. This is an important and timely reminder as some set about reviving 'kairos theology' in South Africa.<sup>21</sup> This people's theology praxis is a distinctive feature of the strand of South African

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17 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 32.

18 For an incisive analysis of this concept see Per Frostin, *Liberation Theology in Tanzania and South Africa: A First World Interpretation* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1988), 10-11.

19 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 63, note 15.

20 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 63, note 15.

21 See the "Kairos Southern Africa" initiative: <http://kairossouthernafrica.wordpress.com>

theology that came to be called 'Contextual Theology'.<sup>22</sup> The Institute for Contextual Theology (ICT) and the work of Albert Nolan have been instrumental in both theorising and facilitating this process of doing theology.<sup>23</sup> And, as the *Revised Second Edition* of in *The Kairos Document* indicates, this way of doing people's and then prophetic theology has had an impact within similar contexts of struggle outside of South Africa.

How much an impact this theological process had on *Kairos Palestine*, and indeed on other 'kairos' documents, is difficult to determine. *Evangelical Witness in South Africa: South African Evangelicals Critique Their Own Theology and Practice* (1986), the direct response to and engagement with *The Kairos Document* by a group of 'concerned evangelicals', adopted a similar process in producing their 'kairos' document between September 1985 and June 1986.<sup>24</sup> *A Relevant Pentecostal Witness* (1988), the next of the South African 'kairos' documents, which takes up the challenge of *Evangelical Witness in South Africa* and builds upon it,<sup>25</sup> is not overt about the process of its production, but does commit the 'authors' in the concluding "Plan of Action" to be involved "through workshops and other similar projects ... with clergy and laity", and "to make our witness practical by being involved in community projects in conjunction with progressive community organisations".<sup>26</sup>

*Kairos Central America (Kairós Centroamericano)* (1988) is not very clear about the process that produced it. The "we" of the document is not unpacked, and the impression given throughout is that the document is produced by some on behalf of others. However, in his "Introduction" to the document, Robert McAfee Brown is clear that the document followed the same kind of process as South Africa's *Kairos Document*.

Clearly stimulated by the publication of the South African kairos document and the extraordinary response to it, a group of Christian leaders in Central America gathered to discuss the possibility of issuing a similar document addressed to their own situation.

22 Gerald O. West, "Liberation Hermeneutics after Liberation in South Africa", in *The Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, edited by Alejandro F. Botta and P.R. Andriach, *Semeia Studies* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009); Gerald O. West, "The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa, with an Emphasis on Biblical Hermeneutics", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXVI, July (2010).

23 Albert Nolan, "A Workers' Theology", in *The Threefold Cord: Theology, Work and Labour*, edited by James R. Cochrane and Gerald O. West (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 1991); Albert Nolan, "Work, the Bible, Workers, and Theologians: Elements of a Workers' Theology", *Semeia* 73 (1996); James R. Cochrane, "Questioning Contextual Theology", in *Towards an Agenda for Contextual Theology: Essays in Honour of Albert Nolan*, edited by McGlory T. Speckman and Larry T. Kaufmann (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2001).

24 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Preface, 68-70.

25 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §1, 102.

26 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §5, 108.

Following the same pattern of reflection-action-reflection-action, a variety of groups in the various countries of Central America created the document reprinted below, issued on April 3, 1988, with more than a hundred signers out of many hundreds who had shared in the process of its creation.<sup>27</sup>

*The Road to Damascus: Kairos and Conversion* (1989), produced by “Christians from different church traditions in seven different nations: the Philippines, South Korea, Namibia, South Africa, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala”,<sup>28</sup> does not disclose the process behind the ‘we’ of the document, but the implication is that those who contributed to the document from each country were part of processes similar to those described and advocated for by *The Kairos Document*. In the “Conclusion”, for example, the document states that “The experience of our seven countries working together to compile this document over a period of two and a half years has been an example of solidarity”.<sup>29</sup> There is also a long footnote that is worth quoting in part, for it takes up the notion of ‘the people’, implying their presence and participation in the project:

‘The people’ is a relatively new sociological and political term. ... ‘The people’ ... is a social force, a social movement, a new social consciousness. ‘The people’ means the poor and oppressed insofar as they have become subjects of their own future (historical actors) rather than mere objects of historical change. In other words, when those who are oppressed and those who side with them become conscious of themselves as a force that can be organised to act together, to make demands and to change the course of history, they become ‘the people’.<sup>30</sup>

McAfee Brown confirms such a people-driven process in his “Introduction” to this document, saying that the document was in the process of being written long before its publication date, “and represents the fruit of over two and a half years of discussions, meetings and draftings”.<sup>31</sup>

*Violence: The New Kairos* (1990), another product of the Institute for Contextual Theology, follows a similar ‘people’s theology/prophetic theology’ process to that of *The Kairos Document*.<sup>32</sup> But this appears to be the last in the ‘kairos’ trajectory to follow such a peoples’ process as a *theological* process, except perhaps for *Kairos Palestine. A Kairos for Kenya* (1991) is a quite different document generated by a quite different process. Though a few biblical texts are cited, there is very little that is theological about this document produced by the Department of Justice, Peace and Reconciliation of the National Council of

27 Robert McAfee Brown, ed. *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1990), 72.

28 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Preamble, 140.

29 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Conclusion, 158.

30 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §15, note 3, 158.

31 Brown, *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church*, 110.

32 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §1.

Churches of Kenya. While the document is “an attempt to capture the spirit and message of Kenyans”, it is clearly not the product of ‘the people’; and while the document is an expression of the “pastoral concern” of the National Council of Churches of Kenya, it is focused more on challenging the ruling KANU (Kenya African National Union) party to respond adequately to its own KANU Review Committee report than it is a theological engagement with these important political developments.<sup>33</sup> However, within the Kenyan context at that time, addressing the ruling party of a one-party state, within a country where Christianity has a distinct presence in the public realm,<sup>34</sup> this ‘kairos’ document could be considered to be implicitly prophetic at the theological level.<sup>35</sup>

The *European Kairos Document* (1998) charts the ‘kairos’ trajectory within which it locates itself in its “Introduction”, including the South African *Kairos Document*, the Central American *Kairos Document* (*Kairós Centroamericano*), and *The Road to Damascus* document.<sup>36</sup> And while the *European Kairos Document* is clearly the product of a long process (1996-1998), involving grassroots networks, both secular and religious, the document is not really a *theological* response to the “unjust developments in Europe” it identifies and analyses.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the document is overt in its intended audience, namely, those who “organise themselves in *civil society*”,<sup>38</sup> and while Christians and churches are a component of civil society,<sup>39</sup> they are not the primary addressees nor is their discourse the focus of the document.

So, while the *European Kairos Document* follows *The Kairos Document* in its basic See-Judge-Act process of production and documentary format, as do most of the ‘kairos’ documents, the ‘Judge’ moment is fairly thin theologically. Developed by Fr. Joseph Cardijn in the 1930s in Belgium, where he was working as a chaplain among factory workers,<sup>40</sup> the ‘See-Judge-Act’ process has been adopted and adapted in a range of contexts, including South Africa. For example, among the Young Christian Workers (YCW), young workers begin by analysing the conditions experienced by themselves and their friends at work, at home and at school (‘See’). They then assess the situation “in the light of the Gospel” (‘Judge’), and then try to improve the situation by taking appropriate action to

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33 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Introduction, 174-76.

34 See Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its Public Role* (London: Hurst & Company, 1998); Paul Gifford, *Christianity, Politics, and Public Life in Kenya* (London: Hurst & Company, 2009).

35 The “NCKK Memorandum to the KANU Review Committee” which forms an appendix within the *A Kairos for Kenya* is a little more overtly theological; see Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 189.

36 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Introduction, 203-04.

37 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Introduction 204.

38 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Introduction 206.

39 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Introduction 206.

40 Steve de Gruchy, “See-Judge-Act: Putting Faith into Action” (Unpublished booklet, Undated).



change conditions ('Act').<sup>41</sup> This version of the praxis cycle has been a significant resource in the South African context, was embodied in *The Kairos Document*, and was appropriated by other 'kairos' documents, including the *European Kairos Document*. As part of its "Introduction" the *European Kairos Document* explains the "four steps" that constitute it. These include "Seeing the truth of the situation" and "Recognising the causes" (See); "Making a judgement with our hearts and minds" (Judge); and "Acting together" (Act).<sup>42</sup>

But as I have indicated, and as the phrasing of the *European Kairos Document* demonstrates, the 'Judge' component of the process is largely a socio-political judgement rather than a sustained and in-depth judgement using theological categories. In this respect the *European Kairos Document* is similar to *A Kairos for Kenya*. What the *European Kairos Document* refers to as "faith communities" are among the social sectors analysed in the document, and like *The Kairos Document* there is recognition that faith communities are part of the problem,<sup>43</sup> but there is little theological engagement with this sector.<sup>44</sup> What 'theology' there is is framed, appropriately perhaps for this context, within the language of "spirituality", with the document arguing that socialist responses to capitalism "overlooked the fact that *people have emotions, love beauty and want to transcend themselves in their world*".<sup>45</sup> This "dimension in people" is what the document refers to as 'spirituality'.<sup>46</sup> In the final paragraph of the 'Judge' section of the document there is a recognition, perhaps, that the document has framed rather than explored the theological in sufficient depth, and so there is a call to faith communities, as well as other social sectors, "to share with us their view of the issues referred to here".<sup>47</sup> So true to *The Kairos Document* tradition, process is foregrounded, but the theological dimensions are decidedly underdeveloped.

The *Zimbabwean Kairos Document* (1998) begins, as does *Kairos Palestine*, with a clear invocation of *The Kairos Document*, proclaiming "This is our critical moment of truth".<sup>48</sup> Interestingly, this is the first 'kairos' document to identify HIV/AIDS as part of this "critical moment of truth".<sup>49</sup> Strangely, for a document that echoes *The Kairos Document* so closely, there is nothing overt about the process

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41 I.D. Stevens, "The Role of the Church in Industry and Industrial Relations; Focusing on the Supportive Role with Worker Organisations, Especially the Independent Trade Unions in South Africa" (Honours, University of Natal, 1985), 25-26.

42 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Introduction 207.

43 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §III, 1, 213.

44 This sector is, of course, the focus of *The Kairos Document*.

45 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §III, 2, 219.

46 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §III, 2, 219.

47 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §III, 2, 220.

48 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Preface 235.

49 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Preface 235.

that produced this important contribution to the 'kairos' trajectory. But, as I will examine in more detail in the next section of my paper, this 'kairos' document is very clearly theological. Its innovation lies in how it deploys the See-Judge-Act framework. Instead of the format adopted by each of the 'kairos' documents examined thus far, the *Zimbabwean Kairos Document* begins each of its main sections with a sustained biblical-theological introduction, and then intersperses and 'interrupts' its social analysis with 'boxes' of theological comment, making theological 'judgement' as it analyses. Similarly, the document does the same with its call to action, introducing 'boxes' amidst its social analysis which summon its readers to particular forms of action.

But process is not entirely forgotten, for like *The Kairos Document*, the *Zimbabwean Kairos Document* concludes with a statement about the provisional nature of the document.

We must be clear. There is nothing final about this document. It is not something with which we will all agree. Our hope is that it will stimulate discussion, debate, reflection and prayer, but above all that it will lead to action. We invite all committed Christians to take the matters we have raised further, to do more research, to develop the themes we have presented here or critique them and return to the Bible, as we have tried to do with the questions raised by the crisis of our times.<sup>50</sup>

I will return to this emphasis on the Bible in my next section of the article, but here I want to reiterate my argument of this section of the paper, namely, that theological process is a foundational component of the South African *Kairos Document*, and that this foundational dimension has been taken up to a similar or lesser extent in the 'kairos' documents that it has inspired.

*Kairos India 2000* (1999?) and the *American Kairos Document* (2007?) are examples of two incomplete processes.<sup>51</sup> In the case of *Kairos India 2000* it seems that some initial work was done by James Massey, a leading Indian theologian, and presented to some forty social activists, academics, and community leaders in early August 1999 in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. But what happened at this consultation and what shape its draft "Statement of Conscience" took is not clear from the documentation available.<sup>52</sup> The consultation considered a draft study document, titled "Indian Kairos Document: A Theological Comment on the Socio-Political Crisis in India", edited by Massey, and Massey himself delivered a keynote address to the consultation, in which he offers his analysis of India's 'kairos'. For Massey this includes a challenge to the churches (so echoing South

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50 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §3.11, 276.

51 In his analysis of three of the early 'kairos' documents, Robert McAfee Brown concludes with the question, "Is it time for a *Kairos USA* document?", and reflects on the need for and the beginnings of process in the USA; see Brown, *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church*, 143-51.

52 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 280-82.

Africa's *Kairos Document*) to take sides with the “historically oppressed Dalit-Bahujan communities of the last 3500 years”.<sup>53</sup> In his analysis the church is in “dire need” of “a prophetic spirituality” that will confront “evil and injustice”, specifically the twin agents of Indian oppression, namely “cultural nationalism” and “globalization”.<sup>54</sup> The available documentation points to the potential for a ‘kairos’ process, but provides little by way of what that process might have included.

In the case of the *American Kairos Document*, a web-based process was initiated in 2006, but there has been little collaborative activity on this website, and none since the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2007. It is not clear whether the meetings advocated for by the website, twice monthly meetings in a local Cleveland Heights, Ohio, bookstore, took place and if so what was produced.<sup>55</sup> Interestingly, at a recent lecture in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, Charles Villa-Vicencio stated that he had been informed that a ‘kairos’ document was being planned in the USA.<sup>56</sup>

Which brings us back, within the historical trajectory, to the ‘kairos’ document I began with, *Kairos Palestine*. As I have said, the document itself implies a process of production. However, this process is not an overt dimension of the document, as it is in *The Kairos Document*. As we will see in the next section, the kind of theology done by this document seems to indicate that those with theological training played a substantial hand in its production. And the “Kairos Palestine” website supports this assumption, for it identifies a team of fifteen individuals who are represented as the ‘authors’ of the document.<sup>57</sup> Of this team, eight are ordained, and six are explicitly represented as academics. So it would appear that though the Palestinian ‘kairos’ process clearly includes six on the team who are non-ordained and non-academic activists (three women and three men), the process was not deliberately driven by a people’s-theology-type process, as was *The Kairos Document*.

I assume and hope that those who know more about the particular details of each of these ‘kairos’ documents will have more to say about the processes that produced them, for no document can fully encapsulate the forces and factors that constituted it. But clearly how a document represents itself in its final form is important for its message, which is why we can argue that theological process is a significant and distinctive feature of the South African *Kairos Document*. This

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53 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 281.

54 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 281.

55 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, 285.

56 Pietermaritzburg Cluster of Theological Institutions “Staff Day” lecture, Seth Mokitimi Methodist Seminary, 15<sup>th</sup> June, 2001. There have been a number of other ‘kairos’ groups, many of whom may not have had any interest in producing a ‘kairos’ document. An example is a ‘kairos’ group that were active in Switzerland (personal communication).

57 <http://www.kairospalestine.ps/?q=node/2>

theological process has a distinctive shape, beginning with people's theology and then moving to prophetic theology, all within the overall shape of a 'See-Judge-Act' methodological process. This two-step process is a significant feature of *The Kairos Document*, and is taken up to a similar or lesser extent by each of the 'kairos' documents that stand in its trajectory.

The second distinctive feature I will address in this article is that of the kind of theology produced by this process.

## A Biblical Theology

*Kairos Palestine* begins with a quotation from the Bible: "They say, 'Peace, peace' when there is not peace" (Jeremiah 6:14). But it soon becomes apparent that the dominant theological orientation is derived more from traditional dogmatic categories than from a contextually driven re-reading of the Bible. Following the same 'See-Judge-Act' framework as *The Kairos Document*, the Palestinian 'kairos' document includes three components in its 'Judge' section: A word of faith, hope, and love.<sup>58</sup> The "Word of faith" component begins with the creedal-type formulation: "We believe in one God, a good and just God".<sup>59</sup> This formulation sets the tone and the shape for the theological analysis/judgement in the document. Under this sub-section heading there are three paragraphs, each following a similar formulation: "2.1 We believe in God, one God, Creator of the universe and of humanity. ..."; "2.1.1 We also believe in God's eternal Word, His only Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, whom God sent as the Saviour of the world."; "2.1.2 We believe in the Holy Spirit, who accompanies the Church and all humanity on its journey. ...". This third sub-section goes on to argue that "It is the Spirit that helps us to understand Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, showing their unity, here and now".<sup>60</sup>

The next sub-section under the main heading "A word of faith" develops this argument under the heading "How do we understand the word of God?" In answering this question the document offers three elements, linked to the element already articulated, namely, that "It is the Spirit that helps us to understand Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, showing their unity, here and now". The second hermeneutical element is that "We believe that God has spoken to humanity, here in our country", to which Hebrews 1:1-2 is quoted in confirmation.<sup>61</sup> The

58 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2, 3, and 4 respectively, 292, 94, 97.

59 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2, 2.1, 292. See also Carlos A. Dreher, *The Walk to Emmaus* (São Leopoldo: Centro de Estudos Bíblicos, 2004). It is not clear whether or to what extent this Latin American resource is being alluded to by *Kairos Palestine*.

60 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.1.2, 292.

61 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.2, 292.

third element in the document's biblical hermeneutics returns to and elaborates on the notion already introduced that the Lord Jesus Christ is God's eternal Word, saying that "We, Christian Palestinians, believe, like all Christians throughout the world, that Jesus Christ came in order to fulfil the Law and the Prophets", and that it is "in his light and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit" that "we read the Holy Scriptures". A reference is then made to the model way in which Jesus meditated upon and interpreted the Scriptures together "with the two disciples on their way to Emmaus", and once again the biblical text is quoted, citing Luke 24:27.<sup>62</sup> The fourth element emphasises context. Jesus came "proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was near", and he came "with 'a new teaching'", citing Mark 1:27. Given this, the argument continues, "We believe that the Word of God is a living Word, casting a particular light on each period of history, manifesting to Christian believers what God is saying to us here and now".<sup>63</sup>

Having introduced this final element, the document immediately continues to speak out against what it considers to be the "unacceptable" biblical hermeneutics of "fundamentalist Biblical interpretation". In the analysis of *Kairos Palestine*, fundamentalist biblical interpretation transforms "the Word of God into letters of stone that pervert the love of God and His providence in the life of both peoples and individuals". This form of biblical interpretation "brings us death and destruction when the word of God is petrified and transmitted from generation to generation as a dead letter". And focal issue around which this fundamentalist biblical interpretation manifests itself is the land: "This dead letter is used as a weapon in our present history in order to deprive us of our rights in our own land."<sup>64</sup> The section on "A word of faith" then moves logically into its last sub-section, which is a focus on "Our land as a universal mission".<sup>65</sup>

This sub-section is clearly central to the message of the document. The logic of the argument is not always easy to follow, but what is clear is that this sub-section recognises that the contestations concerning the land of Palestine are rooted in contestations concerning what and how the Bible 'says'. What the document rejects is any interpretation of the Bible that lends "a biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of our [Christian and Muslim Palestinian] rights", any interpretation in which the 'good news' of the Gospel becomes "'a harbinger of death' for us". The document argues that such menacing interpretations tend to come from outside the land, from "certain theologians in the West".<sup>66</sup>

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62 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.2.1, 292.

63 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.2.2, 293.

64 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.2.2, 293.

65 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.3, 293.

66 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.3.3, 294.

But the point I want to emphasize in my analysis is how this section of the document and the document generally understands biblical theology and biblical interpretation. *Palestine Kairos* calls on those theologians in the West who “try to attach a biblical and theological legitimacy to the infringement of our rights” “to deepen their reflection on the Word of God and to rectify their interpretations so that they might see in the Word of God a source of life for all peoples”.<sup>67</sup> The problem, according to *Kairos Palestine*, is “the wrong interpretation of some theologians”. The task, then, according to the document is “to safeguard the Word of God as a source of life and not of death, so that ‘good news’ remains what it is, ‘good news’ for us and for all”.<sup>68</sup> For, the argument continues, “we declare that any use of the Bible to legitimize or support political options and positions that are based upon injustice,<sup>69</sup> imposed by one person on another, or by one people on another, transform religion into human ideology and strip the Word of God of its holiness, its universality and truth”.<sup>70</sup>

The section on “A word of faith” struggles with the tension of holding to a unified and universal “revelation of God”, while at the same time holding to a revolutionary and particular “living Word”. In so doing *Kairos Palestine* remains faithful to the trajectory of the South African *Kairos Document*. A distinctive feature of *The Kairos Document* is that it claims to be a contextual and a biblical theological response. This is already evident in the first edition, but is particularly marked in the *Second Revised Edition*.

While it is true that “the editing of [the first edition of] the document has been kept to a minimum”,<sup>71</sup> what amendments, elaborations, additions have been made include a substantially increased engagement with the Bible. The most extensive revisions were made to the section “Towards a prophetic theology”, in order to develop it more fully,<sup>72</sup> and, significantly, “mainly because of the request that more quotations from the Bible be included in the text”.<sup>73</sup> Clearly those involved in the process wanted to ground prophetic theology in the Bible, perhaps because this form of theology was not that familiar in the dominant theology of their churches and perhaps because this form of theology, borne in “the flames of the townships”<sup>74</sup>

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67 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.3.3, 294.

68 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.3.4, 294.

69 In the next paragraph, §2.5., Israeli occupation is specifically named as “a sin against God and humanity”.

70 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.4, 294.

71 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Preface, 30.

72 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Preface, 30.

73 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §4.2., note 16, 63.

74 Nolan, “Kairos Theology”, 213.

and inscribed on their bodies,<sup>75</sup> was only now finding theological articulation within the process of *The Kairos Document*. Behind both these possible rationales lies a deep desire to know that one's own faith is connected to the faith of one's biblical ancestors. In the words of Rosemary Radford Ruether writing from the same era, feminism's claiming of "the prophetic-liberating tradition of biblical faith" was a deliberate critical appropriation of "a foundation of Christianity", and not "an arbitrary or marginal idea in the Bible".<sup>76</sup> The desire to find lines of connection between one's lived faith and the Bible resides, according to Ruether, in the need "to situate oneself meaningfully in [biblical] history", and "to assure oneself that one is not mad or duped";<sup>77</sup> and as Takatso Mofokeng argued in the 1980s, the Bible is the most "easily accessible ideological silo" for the masses of South Africans in their struggle for liberation.<sup>78</sup> Hence the need to locate and substantiate "Prophetic Theology" in the Bible.

This 'hermeneutic of trust' in the Bible, that it is a liberating Word of God, is common across the 'kairos' trajectory, all the way to *Kairos Palestine*. Even the civil society and secular orientated *European Kairos Document* notes with approval that "Christians and even institutional churches are returning to their biblical roots and rediscovering their 'preferential option for the poor'".<sup>79</sup> This, it is assumed, is 'the' or at least 'a' central axis of the Bible.<sup>80</sup> Two related arguments then follow from this assumption. First, as *The Kairos Document* does, part of the answer to our theological struggle against "State Theology" and "Church Theology" is to proclaim (in the *Second Revised Edition*) that "Our KAIROS impels us to return to the Bible and to search the Word of God for a message that is relevant to what we are experiencing in South Africa today".<sup>81</sup> Second, as *The Kairos Document* also does, part of the answer to our theological struggle against "State Theology" and "Church Theology" is to proclaim (as both editions do) that "State Theology" generates its theological position "by misusing theological concepts and biblical texts for its political purposes",<sup>82</sup> and that "the type of faith

75 Gerald O. West, "Articulating, Owning and Mainstreaming Local Theologies: The Contribution of Contextual Bible Study", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 122(2005).

76 Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology* (London: SCM, 1983), 24.

77 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 18.

78 Takatso Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation", *Journal of Black Theology* 2 (1988), 40.

79 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, Introduction, 203.

80 Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 24; J. Severino Croatto, *Biblical Hermeneutics: Toward a Theory of Reading as the Production of Meaning* (New York: Orbis, 1987), 57-58.

81 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §4.1, 49.

82 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2, 6.

and spirituality that has dominated Church life for centuries", now named "Church Theology", "has no biblical foundation".<sup>83</sup>

But while such a view of the Bible has been a distinctive feature of Latin American Liberation Theology and African Theology, it has been explicitly rejected by Feminist Theology and South African Black Theology.<sup>84</sup> So it is understandable that those 'kairos' documents influenced by Latin American Liberation Theology, such as *Kairós Centroamericano*, *The Road to Damascus*, *European Kairos*, and perhaps even *Kairos Palestine*, would adopt a 'hermeneutic of trust' toward the Bible. And given the strong influence of Latin American Liberation Theology on the Institute for Contextual Theology, and the pervasive presence of African Theology in South Africa, it is also understandable that *The Kairos Document* might contain elements of a 'hermeneutics of trust'. But as I have indicated, South African Black Theology has been eloquent and insistent on its rejection of a 'hermeneutic of trust' and its embrace of a 'hermeneutic of suspicion'. Indeed, one of the most significant contributions of South African Black Theology to liberation hermeneutics in general has been its careful argument that it is not only the ideological uses to which the Bible has been put that is the problem, but the ideological nature of the Bible itself. At the very moment that *The Kairos Document* was 'in process', Itumeleng Mosala was arguing that "the attempt to claim *the whole* of the Bible in support of black theology is misdirected"; indeed, he insisted, "most of the Bible ... offers no certain starting point for a theology of liberation within itself" because "it is a ruling class document and represents the ideological and political interests of the ruling class".<sup>85</sup> Making a similar argument Takatso Mofokeng points to "the obvious presence in the Bible of texts, stories and books which can only serve an oppressive cause".<sup>86</sup> Mosala even engaged directly with *The Kairos Document*, arguing that it reflects a "biblical hermeneutical bankruptcy" and "surrenders the monopoly of biblical interpretation to the very theologies it is trying to castigate".<sup>87</sup>

So why is there so little of this biblical hermeneutical strand in *The Kairos Document*? Part of the answer may be the political-ideological differences among 'black theologians', with those on the Pan-Africanist Congress/Azanian People's

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83 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §3.4, 17.

84 Gerald O. West, *Biblical Hermeneutics of Liberation: Modes of Reading the Bible in the South African Context*, Second Edition (Maryknoll, NY and Pietermaritzburg: Orbis Books and Cluster Publications, 1995); West, "The Legacy of Liberation Theologies in South Africa".

85 Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Use of the Bible in Black Theology", in *The Unquestionable Right to Be Free: Essays in Black Theology*, edited by Itumeleng J. Mosala and Buti Tlhagale (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1986), 179, 96.

86 Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation", 37.

87 Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Meaning of Reconciliation: A Black Perspective", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 59 (1987), 23.



Organisation end of the spectrum and those on United Democratic Front/African National Congress end of the spectrum finding it difficult ‘to hear’ each other’s contributions;<sup>88</sup> and part of the answer lies in the process with which *The Kairos Document* was produced. Given Mofokeng’s own analysis, namely that the Bible is the most “easily accessible ideological silo” for the masses of South Africans in their struggle for liberation,<sup>89</sup> it is understandable that ‘the people’ would want a document that drew on their preferred ideological weapon of struggle.

But one can detect elements of Mosala’s critique that have been taken up in the *Second Revised Edition*. Central to Mosala’s argument is that an “unstructural understanding of the Bible” might simply “reinforce and confirm unstructural understanding of the present”.<sup>90</sup> What Mosala means by a ‘structural’ understanding of the Bible here is a historical-materialist analysis of the social sectors that produced the various redactional layers of the Bible.<sup>91</sup> And while *The Kairos Document* does not engage with this dimension of the Bible, it does, increasingly so in the *Second Revised Edition*, engage with the structural dimension of “the present”. An analysis of “the structures of society” is a key component of the first edition of *The Kairos Document*,<sup>92</sup> but it is far more marked in the *Second Revised Edition*. In almost every added or elaborated section of the *Second Revised Edition* there is an emphasis on and analysis of social structures or systems.<sup>93</sup>

And it is this structural or systemic analysis of church and society that is the defining feature of *The Kairos Document* and all the ‘kairos’ documents that stand in its trajectory. This is what unites the various ‘kairos’ documents; a detailed socio-historical structural analysis determined by each specific context. Though the emphasis may be different, with some ‘kairos’ documents focusing more on the political dimensions, others on the economic dimensions, others on the racial/ethnic, others on the colonial/postcolonial, and others on the religious dimensions, the ‘See’ moment of the ‘See-Judge-Act’ framework tends to predominate.

## Doing Theology Differently

But different ‘kairos’ documents do the ‘Judge’ moment differently. What was truly innovative and distinctive about *The Kairos Document*, making this document deserving of the definite article, is a combination of the theological process that

88 Personal communication with Itumeleng Mosala, 30 May 2011.

89 Mofokeng, “Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation”, 40.

90 Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 32.

91 Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology*.

92 See for example Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §3.2, 13-14.

93 See Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §2.2, 39, §3.2, 44-45, §3.4, 48, §4.3, 53.

generated it, and the theological product that it represents. While a structural and sectoral analysis of context is a component of each of the 'kairos' documents, *The Kairos Document* (in both editions) introduces a structural and sectoral analysis of the Church (with a capital 'C'), arguing that "the Church is divided against itself",<sup>94</sup> and demonstrating this by offering careful analysis of three contending theologies cutting across the Church. This is profound stuff! Unlike *Kairos Palestine*, which tends to remain within orthodox theological categories,<sup>95</sup> as does the stylistically innovative *Zimbabwean Kairos Document*, *The Kairos Document* delves into the *lived theologies* of ordinary South Africans to forge new theological categories, to establish the relationships between them, and to fill them with local content, such as 'State theology', 'Church theology', 'Prophetic theology'.

Other 'kairos' documents follow, but all to a lesser extent, with the next most explicitly unorthodox 'kairos' document being *The Road to Damascus*, which was partly a South African product, and which poses the unsettling question: "Is the God invoked by both sides the same God?"<sup>96</sup>

Of course, this sectoral and structural scrutiny of theology could have been taken into the Bible, where it would not have been difficult to find biblical support for 'State Theology' and 'Church Theology'. Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere,<sup>97</sup> what makes 'Church Theology' so dangerous is that there is so much of it in the Bible! So it is not surprising that Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki, and Jacob Zuma have, in returning religion to the public realm after liberation, framed this in 'Church Theology' terms.<sup>98</sup>

But because *The Kairos Document's* was driven by 'the people', for whom the Bible was/is predominantly a site of trust, not suspicion, this meant that it became a primary (and substantially an unproblematic) source for doing 'kairos' theology. And yet, if Mofokeng is correct in hearing the deep concerns of sectors of the black youth about the Bible,<sup>99</sup> then some sense of contestation *within the biblical text itself* could have been a valuable resource, not only for South Africans, but also for the other 'kairos' documents. A recognition of contending trajectories<sup>100</sup> in the

94 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §1, 36, see also §1, 5-6, §5.1, 24.

95 Using categories like 'faith', 'hope', and 'love'.

96 Leonard, *The Kairos Documents*, §29, 146.

97 Gerald O. West, "Kairos 2000: Moving Beyond Church Theology", *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 108 (2000).

98 Gerald O. West, "Unstructural Analysis of the Bible Reinforcing Unstructural Analysis of African Contexts in (South) Africa?", *Old Testament Essays* 23, no. 3 (2010).

99 Mofokeng, "Black Christians, the Bible and Liberation", 40.

100 Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel", in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, edited by Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

Bible would have been of use, for example, to *Kairos Palestine* in its engagement with contending biblical interpretations around the land issue. Labelling a form of biblical interpretation “fundamentalist”, as *Kairos Palestine* does, or claiming, as *The Kairos Document* does, that the biblical interpretations of the apartheid state are either “misusing” the Bible or have “no biblical foundation” is to delay dealing with a deeply ambiguous Bible. Perhaps if these and other ‘kairos’ documents had dealt more thoroughly with gender or gay issues they may have been forced to engage more fully with contending voices in the Bible, and to have recognised that the Bible, like the Church, is a site of struggle.

## Conclusion

While there are significant similarities across the documents that make up the ‘kairos’ trajectory,<sup>101</sup> there is no ‘kairos’ formula. Indeed, we should be wary of calls for a ‘new’ or ‘another’ ‘kairos’ document. I would go so far as to argue that in order to remain true to the ‘kairos’ process that we need to break with the ‘kairos’ discourse, for there are signs in the ‘kairos’ trajectory that we have become lazy, being too easily satisfied with claiming a ‘kairos’ moment and producing a ‘kairos’ document without embarking on a ‘kairos’ theological process. What *The Kairos Document* has bequeathed us is not the quest for another ‘kairos’ document, but a process of doing theology ‘from below’, among and ‘with’ ‘the people’.<sup>102</sup>

101 Robert McAfee Brown identifies ten “shared characteristics” in *The Kairos Document*, *Kairos Central America*, and *The Road to Damascus*, the first three ‘kairos’ documents, and many of these shared characteristics are common to the other ‘kairos’ documents that came later; see Brown, *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church*, 9-12.

102 Which is why I have reservations about both the (lack of) process and the products of the “Kairos Southern Africa” initiative.