

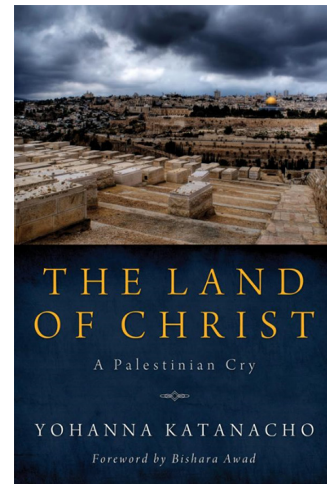
Review Article 'Christ, Israel ... and a Palestinian Cry'

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Yohanna Katanacho was born in June of 1967, now serves as the academic dean for Bethlehem Bible College in the Central West Bank region of the Jordan River under the political control of the Palestinian National Authority. Dr. Katanacho is a Palestinian Evangelical Christian, the son of an Armenian Catholic mother and a Roman Catholic Palestinian father. Although an atheist in his teen years, Dr. Katanacho decided to follow Jesus Christ when he was twenty years old. He then went on to earn a B.S. at Bethlehem University, an M.A. at Wheaton College and an M.Div. and Ph.D. at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. He has authored several books including: *A Commentary on Proverbs*, *The Seven "I am" Sayings in the Gospel of John*, and *The King of Jews and His Young Followers*.

Clearly he has the background and academic credentials to present a Palestinian evangelical perspective on the land promised to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants (going forward referred to as "the promised land").

Katanacho sets out to provide what he considers to be a biblical view of the land that is rooted in biblical love, faithful to the Bible, and seeks justice for both Palestinians and Jews (6). He challenges the Jewish people's right to the land believing the promise of "Land" to the "people of God" is fulfilled in the New

Testament. To back his position he challenges Jewish claims to the land. Katanacho believes that the land known as Israel belongs to Christ, and that the promises of the land now apply wholly to the New Testament people of God, essentially espousing a replacement theology (i.e. The church replaces Israel as the people of God).

He challenges those who would claim Israel's continual divine right to the land by attempting to demonstrate how biblically untenable that position has become. First he claims that the biblical borders of the land are unclear, citing various Old Testament texts, which do not appear to agree with each other. Then he tries to show that the term Israel seems to change in definition throughout the Bible. Finally, he argues that God gave the land through Christ, the greater "Israel" - the Israel who actually kept faith with God the Father. He insists that the land cannot be given to a faithless, disobedient, and Messiah-rejecting people based on the teachings of Moses in Deuteronomy 28:63-68, etc. He makes much of this point throughout his book. Katanacho has a particular problem with dispensationalism and dispensationalists. He believes it to be of late historical development, adhered to by corrupt and undereducated people, and founded on a highly problematic

literal hermeneutic.

The author insists the land belongs to Christ, and citing passages like Proverbs 2:21-22 says he will give it to his faithful and obedient people (and certainly not to unbelieving and wicked oppressors). In the author's eschatological understanding, righteousness precedes a return to the land. God will not tolerate an unrighteous people to possess the land (Dt. 28:36-37, 63-68).

Katanacho asserts that the land was the initiation of the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God on earth. After the land's curse (Gen. 3:17) God determines to restore it (Isa. 51:3; Eze. 36:35) to be a land of faith, a land of peace, a land of reconciliation, a land that serves as a gateway to heaven, and a land of refuge and safety for the endangered (56-58).

The author argues that none of those sacred purposes are accomplished through the Israeli occupation. In fact, for the author, the Israeli occupation of lands "taken" in 1967 (not 1948) is the great sin and obstacle to peace, which fomented the Arab-Israeli Conflict. If it were not for the "occupation" there would not be all the anger and violence associated with the land (47). The occupation is sin because it dehumanized people whom God created (53, 60). Since according to Katanacho the 1967 occupation is the great sin, Biblical resistance to that sin is justified. For Katanacho this means bringing non-violent economic pressure on Israel. That in turn will cause Israel to end of the 1967 occupation and create the conditions necessary for an equitable one or two state solution to be reached (60).

This theme is addressed in *The Palestinian Kairos Document: A Moment of Truth*, which the author includes in the books addendum. This document decries the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, the wall that Israel erected separating the West Bank from Israel, Israeli

settlements, military checkpoints, the separation of some families, the restricted access to the holy site for Palestinians, the Palestinian refugee camps, Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails, the exclusion of many Palestinians from living in Jerusalem, various and unspecified human rights violations, the unspecified discrimination of Israeli Palestinians, the emigration of Palestinian young people from the land, the Israeli overreaction to Palestinians who resist Israeli occupation, the excuse of terrorism used to distort the true nature of the conflict, and the failure of the international community "to deal positively with the will of the Palestinian people expressed in the outcome of the democratic and legal elections of 2006" (74-76). After addressing the issues of hermeneutics and a theology of the land, the Kairos statement calls the U.N. partition of the land in 1948 "a new injustice" (78), and any theology or biblical interpretation, which argues against that premise strips "the Word of God of its holiness, its inclusiveness and truths" (73).

Therefore, "the occupation is a sin against God and humanity because it deprives the Palestinians of their basic human rights" (79). The Kairos document puts its hope in the love of God for the Palestinian people, finds solace in the support and prayers it has received from like-minded people around the world, and believes one day justice will be served for the Palestinian people (80-83).

While the document celebrates the anti-retaliatory love of Scripture (Mt. 5:45-47; Rom. 12:17; I P. 3:9), that love does not mean accepting evil or aggression. In fact the Kairos document insists that the evil of the Israeli occupation must be resisted – love demands it (p. 84). But how can it be resisted in a loving way? The Kairos document calls the world to "engage in divestment and in economic and

commercial boycott of everything produced by the occupation” (85). Thus the Kairos document is a call to inflict economic pain on Israel until they unilaterally end the occupation (85). Since the root of so-called terrorism springs from the injustices of the occupation, pretending to end terrorism first is not a valid approach (85).

The Kairos document ends with a call to settle the Jerusalem question first but does not offer a suggestion as to how that vexing issue might be resolved (89).

While one can appreciate the approach and the passion of the author’s position, it seems to this reviewer there are certain assumptions, omissions, and biases that seem to undercut the author’s arguments and assertions. First the author claims that the various Biblical descriptions of the borders to what might be called “greater Israel” calls into question the notion of fixed literal borders for national Israel. The author sees these descriptions as *literary*, “a spacial merism that refers to the whole world” (39). This, of course, requires that one abandon a grammatical-historical hermeneutic in favor of a more spiritualized approach to Scripture.

While most would agree that “the earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it,” that fact does not preclude that God can give what is his to whomever he chooses. Instead of abandoning the plain sense of the biblical text, biblical authority might be better served by a more thorough and respectful exegesis. Could there be other explanations for the various boundaries of the Promised Land mentioned in Scripture? Might there be another way to harmonize the various descriptions? For instance, one could just simply argue that all the various descriptions should be “added” together to come up with the final configuration of the “greater Israel” being promised by God. Certainly this approach is at least as valid as abandoning the

plain (grammatical-historical) sense of the text. Especially as such abandonment clearly leads to a meaning foreign to the author’s original intent.

The same is true for the author’s problem with the various identifications of “Israel” and Jewish people in the Bible. What does it matter if those terms include more and more people throughout biblical history? The promises of the land belong exclusively to the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The land is literally promised to no one else. This is not to say that others would not benefit from the land promised to physical Israel, many certainly will, but biblically speaking they will do so through the agency of a national ethnic Israel under the rule of the King Jesus. Again, there is nothing in the biblical text that demands the abandonment of the literal meaning of the text, the author’s original intent, or a grammatical-historical hermeneutic.

The same is true for the author’s concern about how the land is given. True the land and the world belong to God through the Messiah Jesus. But this does not preclude his giving the land to Israel. And it’s true that ultimately, a righteous people will inherit the land. But there is now no one righteous but God alone - certainly not Israel or the Palestinian people. The land will never be inherited by righteous people this side of the second coming of the Messiah Jesus!

So where does that leave us now? The author insists that contemporary Israel is an illegitimate occupier of Palestinian lands because Israel is unrighteous on so many levels. He assumes the land will (or should) “spew them out” (Dt. 28:63-68) one way or another. But Israel lived “unrighteously” in the land for nearly 1000 years before the Babylonian captivity in 586 BC, and then another 500+

years until the destruction of the second temple by the Romans in AD 70. “Unrighteous” Israel has only been back in control of the land since 1948 (or 1967 depending on ones perspective). Biblically speaking, it could be another 1500 years until they are ejected from the land again. God has shown great patience with Israel in past “occupations.”

This of course assumes that God is not now dealing or will not deal with “unrighteous” Israel while they are actually in the land, as they are now. There is Scripture which seems to indicate the recalling of a spiritually lifeless people to the land and then once in the land, the coming of a great spiritual renewal (Eze. 36:24-32; Eze. 37:1-14; Hosea 3; Zech. 12:10ff). Israel was hardly a “righteous” nation when the remnant of Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity (Ezra 9-10; Neh. 5, 9, 10, 13).

Biblically speaking it is entirely possible for these current generations of “unrighteous Israelis” to finally realize their true condition, repent, receive their Messiah, have their sins removed, their spirits revived (Eze. 36:24-32), and be the restored and righteous nation they were always meant to be (Acts 1:8; 3:21). There is no biblical necessity to replace Israel with the church. Especially in light of the New Covenant teaching that the redeemed Gentiles do not replace Israel but are added to Israel (Eph. 2:11-22). According to the Apostle Paul, they are now fellow citizens of God’s Kingdom with God’s people (believing Israel) and (fellow) members of God’s household (Eph. 2:11-22). Clearly the Gentiles will enter into all the blessings promised to them in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3) and throughout Scripture (Isa. 49:6; 9:2; 42:6, 51:4, etc.).

Yes, for a time National Israel will remain in unbelief, rejecting her Messiah. But the day will come, writes the Apostle Paul, after the full

number of Gentiles comes in, that “all Israel will be saved” (Rom. 11:25)! Interestingly, the author does not interact with any New Testament references, which seem to indicate Israel’s future restoration (Mt. 19:28; Luke 1:32-33; 21:24; 22:25-30; Acts 1:8; 3:21; etc.) The reader is left to wonder why.

As noted, the Kairos document bemoans the building of the separation wall and military checkpoints but never acknowledges why the wall was built or the reason for military checkpoints, or what those security measures have done for Israel’s safety. The document asserts it’s the “occupation” which inspires Palestinian violence. If Israel were to end it, the violence would stop. This of course ignores history. There was no post-1967 style “occupation” in 1948, or in pre-war 1967 for that matter. But the Arab world attacked Israel none-the-less. In the mind of this reviewer, the Kairos signers betray either a dangerous disregard for the safety of the Israeli population or a breathtaking naiveté of radical Palestinian hatred and intentions for Israel. Either way Israel would do well not to entrust their future to the Kairos signers’ approach to peace.

The disputed lands of the West Bank belonged to Jordan (not any Palestinian entity) in 1967. In that year, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt conspired to attack Israel. Israel defended itself, and in so doing took the West Bank (along with the Sinai, Gaza, and the Golan Heights). Now the Kairos authors want the West Bank to be given to a previously non-existent entity – the Palestinian Authority (PA) whose very charter calls for Israel’s destruction.

In 2000-2001, and in exchange for real peace, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak offered Yasser Arafat and the PA 91% of the disputed territory, but Yasser Arafat turned it down. Was the deal perfect for the PA? Of course not. But it could

have been the beginning of a real Palestinian state and a real peace. Yet none of these historic realities is ever mentioned by the Kairos authors – just lovely sounding appeals to justice for the Palestinians through the unilateral handover of the West Bank to the PA.

Katanacho's book was quite helpful in gaining an insight into the Palestinian Christian perspective on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Katanacho is squarely in the evangelical camp (we share the same seminary training) and is a first class advocate for his position.

It is good to hear this particular "cry" no matter what your position is on the subject. That being said, the author's failure to interact with the historical realities of the last 70 years and the very real security concerns of the Israeli people undercut the credibility of the author's arguments and caused this reviewer to wonder if this was merely a nicely written propaganda piece for an economic boycott of Israel.

