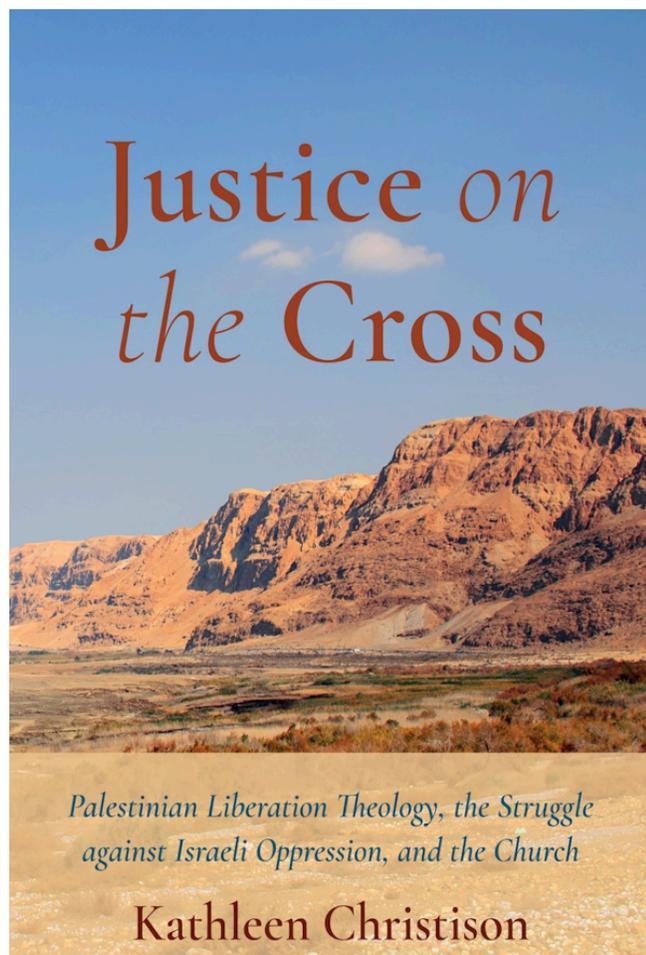


# Book Review:

## ***Kathleen Christison, *Justice on the Cross: Palestinian Liberation Theology, the Struggle Against Israeli Oppression, and the Church* (Wipf and Stock, 2023)***



Full transparency: In May of 2025, I led my eighteenth solidarity tour to Palestine, meeting with leaders of Kairos Palestine and Sabeel, longtime friends; in September, I began reading Kathleen Christison’s *Justice on the Cross* as our Indiana Center for Middle East Peace hosted Rev. Munther Isaac; in October, I finished it as I was co-leading our third “In the Footsteps of Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela” tour in South Africa with Kairos South Africa’s Rev. Edwin Arrison (one of Christison’s manuscript readers), where I interviewed Dr. John de Gruchy. And I’m finishing this review as we host Israel-lobby targeted Congresswoman Cori Bush here and as a new Kairos Palestine document is being issued in Bethlehem – all featured in Christison’s comprehensive book.

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A former CIA policy analyst, Christison knows all the major Palestinian organizations, activists, movements, and theologians, as well as Jewish and Muslim voices of conscience; thus, *Justice on the Cross* complements her two previous more political analyses, *Perceptions of Palestine: Their Influence on U.S. Middle East Policy* (1999) and *The Wound of Dispossession: Telling the Palestinian Story* (2002).

In her introduction, Christison offers, broadly, liberation theology's distinctiveness. "Liberation theology is a people's theology," she writes, and then quotes law professor and critical race scholar Kimberle Crenshaw: It is "a theological expression of...the intertwined political and social struggles of the oppressed against the injustices of racism, colonialism, settler colonialism, ethnic privilege, elite privilege, patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism, and economic dislocation – of all 'othering.'" (3) Then follows the three major human rights reports – B'Tselem, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International – declaring Israel "an apartheid regime."

The ensuing chapters describe the landscape of Palestinian liberation theology: first, its larger global liberation context; second, the Palestinian context; third, Palestinian Christianity; fourth, the primacy of reading Scripture through "the eyes of the heart;" fifth, Jewish allies; and sixth, Christian Zionism as antagonistic to Palestinian liberation.

Christison gives space to the larger context of South African, Latin American, and African American liberation movements, each of which inspired the development of Palestinian liberation theology. Spend time with any of the Palestinian Christian leaders – Naim Ateek, Omar Haramy, Mitri Raheb, Munther Isaac, Rifat Kassis, and the many Christian NGO leaders – and you hear the names and see framed pictures of King, Gutierrez, Mandela, Tutu, and others. She rightly places the global liberation struggle in the context of the global anti-apartheid, anti-racism struggle. I particularly appreciated how Christison prioritizes the foundational experience of the Church in South Africa and Kairos South Africa's Rev. Edwin Arrison and Bonhoeffer scholar Dr. John de Gruchy.

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Christison also helpfully reminds the reader of post-Holocaust Zionism’s dangerous theological and psychological power, what Marc Ellis called “the new history and new theology [Jews] created for themselves when Israel was created...now framed as a polity that gave Jews power and impunity: from suffering came innocence, from innocence came empowerment, from empowerment came impunity.”<sup>1</sup> This makes the witness of many Jewish allies to anti-Zionism critically important, such as Marc Ellis, Mark Braverman, Brant Rosen, Ilan Pappé, and others, grounded in their Judaism. As Brant Rosen has expressed, “I realized the most Jewish thing I could do was stand with the Palestinians.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet Christison reminds us throughout the book of the tragic irony of American Christians prioritizing Zionist ideology over the Gospel, the modern settler colonial nation state of Israel over the kingdom of God that Jesus preached. She enlists scholars Don Wagner, Walter Brueggeman, and others to critique a Christian Zionism that masks a US political ideology that is dangerous to Christians and Jews and, indeed, to America itself. And while her book was published immediately before the present genocide, we note the further irony of Western, particularly American, Christians calling out a racist, triumphalist Christian nationalism while remaining silent about its sister, a racist colonial Christian and Jewish Zionism, now resulting in Israel’s ethnic cleansing and genocide in Gaza and throughout Palestine.

So, because Christian Zionism is theologically heretical, reading Scripture through the eyes of the contemporary nation-state of Israel rather than the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, many Christians in the West – and their churches, too – have become accomplices to Israel’s genocide. But the heart of *Justice on the Cross* is Chapters 2 and 3, respectively, “Palestine: A Lived Theology,” and “Palestine’s Christians: Theology Crying Out.” She rightly gives a central place to the work of Naim Ateek and Sabeel Palestinian Liberation Theology Center, Kairos Palestine, and Mitri Raheb’s “contextual theology.”

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1. Kathleen Christison, *Justice on the Cross: Palestinian Liberation Theology, the Struggle Against Israeli Oppression, and the Church* (Wipf and Stock, 2023), 179.

2. Christison, *Justice on the Cross*, 149.

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They first must break through the “theological faith Nakba,” as Sabeel co-founder, Cedar Duaybis, calls it and challenge the global church to be faithful to its Gospel.<sup>3</sup> They thus lay a burden on the hearts of Western Christians for what Munther Isaac calls “costly solidarity.” Christison describes how some US denominations (United Church of Christ, Presbyterian Church USA, Christian Church–Disciples of Christ) demonstrate this solidarity with Kairos Palestine’s call.

Palestinian liberation theology is a *cri de coeur*, “a cry from the depths of the Palestinian soul.”<sup>4</sup> The cry is grounded in the cross of Jesus as hermeneutic for the decades-long settler colonial, Zionist apartheid and genocidal oppression of the Palestinian people. Palestinians find not only a parallel but solidarity with Jesus on his cross, and a grounding for their resilience, hope, and inspiration for resistance, or “the unique intimacy of the connection between Jesus’ experience of suffering and the Palestinian Christians’ experience of suffering.”<sup>5</sup> As Mitri Raheb has noted, “There is something very deep, something very existential in the cross that connects it to the struggle of our Palestinian people...[The cross] is a symbol not of tragedy but of hope, not of death but of life”<sup>6</sup> and in the words of Naim Ateek, “Justice is nailed to the cross every day in Palestine.”<sup>7</sup>

Christison’s *Justice on the Cross* provides not only a comprehensive overview, but is itself a work of liberation theology, sharing the many Palestinian voices who cry for justice as they are, with Liberator Jesus, nailed to the cross.

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3. Christison, *Justice on the Cross*, 78.

4. Christison, *Justice on the Cross*, 123.

5. Christison, *Justice on the Cross*, 99

6. Christison, *Justice on the Cross*, 112, 114.

7. Christison, *Justice on the Cross*, 97.