HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Towards a Kairos theology

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Dates:
Received: 17 July 2025
Accepted: 27 Aug. 2025
Published: 17 Dec. 2025

How to cite this article:
Van der Westhuizen, H., 2025, 'Towards a Kairos theology', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 81(1), a10936. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v81i1.10936

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This article proposes that the theology of Moltmann – particularly his reflections on time, eschatology and the Trinity – offers profound resources for reimagining *Kairos* theology in the present. Moltmann's theology enables us to think of time not only as a moment of *rupture and crises*, but as *promise and hope*, *relationality and participation*, *rhythm and direction*, *fulfilment and discernment*. Time is deeply *theological*. Read alongside the *Kairos Document*, Moltmann's work helps us move from *kairos as moment* to *kairos as grammar*.

Contribution: Through a close reading of Moltmann's major works, this article seeks to demonstrate how his timely theology may extend the legacy of *kairos* for a new generation of theological reflection and public witness in South Africa.

Keywords: systematic theology; the Kairos Document; kairos; time; Moltmann.

Introduction

In 1985, amid South Africa's escalating political crisis and State of Emergency,[1] a group of Christians issued a prophetic appeal titled *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the church*.[2] Framed as a theological response to apartheid and the church's complicity, the Kairos Document introduced the biblical concept of *kairos* – a decisive moment of truth, crisis,[3] – as the interpretive lens through which Christians were called to discern the will of God and respond with courage and resistance.

At its core, the *Kairos Document* (1985 and 1986)[4] called for a break from 'state theology'[5] and 'church theology',[6] proposing instead a 'prophetic theology'[7] rooted in siding with the oppressed[8] – what the Belhar Confession would name 'the destitute, the poor and the wronged' (Smit 1984:60–73). It was, in a deep sense, a theological intervention in time, calling the church to faithful response to the time.

Its resonance continues to shape South African theological discourse.[9] Yet, four decades later, we live in a different time, or rather, different times.[10] The question is therefore not only how to

1.See Chapter 7 and 8 in Dubow (2014).

2.Kairos Theologians (1985). For a fuller historical account, see De Gruchy and De Gruchy (2004); Elphick and Davenport (eds. 1997); Vosloo (2023).

3.In 1986, the same year that the revised *Kairos Document* was published by the Institute for Contextual theology, the Belhar Confession was adopted as an official confession by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church. For *this* kairos moment – a *status confessionis*, see Smit (1984:14–39). For the confession, see, inter alia, Naudé (2010).

4.For the authorship and composition circumstances of the *Kairos Document,* see Denis (2017).

5.'The South African apartheid State has a theology of its own and we have chosen to call it "State Theology". "State Theology" is simply the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism. It blesses injustice, canonises the will of the powerful and reduces the poor to passivity, obedience and apathy. How does "State Theology" do this? It does it by misusing theological concepts and biblical texts for its own political purposes' (pp. 63–64).

6.'The crisis in which we find ourselves today compels us to question [Church theology], to question its assumptions, its implications and its practicality. In a limited, guarded and cautious way this theology is critical of apartheid. Its criticism, however, is superficial and counter-productive because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation' (p. 67).

7.'Our present Kairos calls for a response from Christians that is … above all, prophetic. It is not enough in these circumstances to repeat generalised Christian principles. We need a bold and incisive response that is prophetic because it speaks to the particular circumstances of this crisis, a response that does not give the impression of sitting on the fence but is clearly and unambiguously taking a stand' (p. 73). See also Vellem on Prophetic theology in Black theology in reference to the *Kairos Document* (2010).

8.The Kairos theologians (1985) argue that 'God sides with the *oppressed*. To say that the Church must now take sides unequivocally and consistently with the poor and the oppressed is to overlook the fact that the majority of Christians in South Africa have already done so. By far the greater part of the Church in South Africa is poor and oppressed. Of course it cannot be taken for granted that everyone who is oppressed has taken up their own cause and is struggling for their own liberation. Nor can it be assumed that all oppressed Christians are fully aware of the fact that their cause is God's cause. Nevertheless it remains true that the Church is already on the side of the oppressed because that is where the majority of its members are to be found. This fact needs to be appropriated and confirmed by the Church as a whole' [*Author's own emphasis*].

9.See Goba (1987:313–325). Also see the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa (2023) 177: Special Issue: The Contested Legacy of the Kairos Document.*

10.The task of theology in South Africa, according to De Gruchy, 'Insofar as the legacy of apartheid remains, much of what was learnt in doing theology in the struggle years remains pertinent. So it would be incorrect to assume that the task of doing theology has

Note: The manuscript is a contribution to the themed collection titled 'The Kairos Document for Contemporary Crisis', under the expert guidance of guest editors Prof. Gift Tlharihani Baloyi and Prof. Eugene Baron.

remember the *Kairos Document*, but how to carry its spirit forward. What does *kairos* mean today? What kind of theology can speak imaginatively into this time?

This article proposes that the theology of Moltmann – particularly his reflections on time, eschatology and the Trinity – offers profound resources for reimagining *Kairos* theology in the present. While the *Kairos Document* identified *a moment* of *kairotic* truth,[11] Moltmann's theology enables us to think of time not only as a moment of *rupture and crises*, but as *promise and hope*, *relationality and participation*, *rhythm and direction*, *fulfilment and discernment*.[12] Time is deeply *theological*.

Read alongside the *Kairos Document*, Moltmann's work helps us move from *kairos as moment* to *kairos as grammar*. Through a close reading of Moltmann's major works,[13] this article seeks to demonstrate how a Trinitarian theology of time may extend the legacy of *kairos* for a new generation of theological reflection and public witness in South Africa.

Rupture and crisis?

The beginnings of Moltmann's theology are shaped by crisis[14] – *existential*,[15] historical and theological. In *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Moltmann 1964), Moltmann retrieves eschatology from the margins of Christian doctrine and insists that it is not merely the final chapter of dogmatics, but its source. Eschatology becomes the logic of Christian faith itself: the anticipation of a future that *ruptures* the closed systems of the present. Theologically, this means that the coming of God's kingdom is not distant but here and now – a force actively *disrupting* the status quo.[16]

This emphasis on eschatology as disruption is not a thematic choice but a temporal one.[17] Moltmann resists any linear notion of time.[18] Instead, time is configured as a site of tension, interruption and contestation. God's future enters not to complete what is already underway, but to rupture it – to expose the present as incomplete. This apocalyptic temporality is not escapist but revolutionary. It is a call to stand within the fissures or fractures of history, not merely to endure them, but to hope *against them*.[19]

What emerges is a theology of promise rooted in prophetic and messianic traditions, shaped in dialogue with Jewish eschatology and critical social thought. In these traditions, the future is not the prolongation of the present, but its radical alternative. Moltmann's early work thus carries a messianic urgency – a refusal to accept the given as the final word.[20] Christian hope, in this vision, does not reconcile itself to the present crisis but rises in protest against it.[21]

(Footnote 10 continues…)
fundamentally altered to suit a changing context. But the transition from apartheid to a non-racial democracy has obviously reshaped public life, and this inevitably requires a different theological response than that which was appropriate within a totalitarian apartheid context. At the same time, *the particular challenges now facing South Africa, the region and the world as a whole are setting new priorities*. *How public theology in South Africa will cope with these challenges and contribute to the common good is the challenge facing churches and theologians*. As previously, South African theologies continue to be influenced by theological and intellectual trends elsewhere, *but how our native theologies will also contribute to the global Church and theology remains to be seen*. As yet, public theology in the new South Africa does not have the clarity it once had, and it is doubtful whether it will ever again have such clarity' (2004:47, [*Author's own emphasis*]). Also see De Gruchy on Christianity and democracy, published in 1995 (pp. 222–223).

11.'The time has come. The moment of truth has arrived … It is the *kairos* or moment of truth not only for apartheid but also for the Church' (Kairos 1985:62).

12.The headings are *heuristic* without claiming to represent a systematic *taxonomy* in Moltmann's own presentation. The headings that serve as interpretive tools to trace the theological development of Moltmann's theology of time, highlight different *emphases* in Moltmann's theology.

13.Throughout, I have worked with the *Jürgen Moltmann Werke* as published by Gütersloher Verlagshaus in 2016. However, I have in the text made use of the dates that these works were first published. References are from the Fortress Press edition for broader readership. As I, after a close reading, work with the broader arguments of these works, I decided to reference key *example* – paragraphs in footnotes. The paragraph serves as examples as it would have been possible to also refer to other just-as-significant passages.

14.When writing about *Theology of hope* in his autobiography, Moltmann refers to it as written in *the Kairos of its time* (Moltmann 2009:97–118).

15.'I read (the) Gospel as a whole and came to the story of the passion; when I heard Jesus' death cry, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and has felt the same forsakenness you are living in now. I began to understand the assailed, forsaken Christ because I knew that he understood me. The divine brother in need, the companion on the way, who goes with you through this "valley of the shadow of death," the fellow-sufferer who carries you, with your suffering. I summoned up the courage to live again, and I was slowly but surely seized by a great hope for the resurrection into God's "wide space where there is no more cramping." This perception of Christ did not come all of a sudden and overnight, either, but it became more and more important for me, and I read the story of the passion again and again' (Moltmann 1993g:29–30).

16.'Eschatology means the doctrine of hope. … From first to last, and not merely in the epilogue, Christianity is eschatology, is hope, forward looking and forward moving, *and therefore also revolutionizing and transforming the present*. The eschatological is not one element of Christianity, but it is the medium of Christian faith as such, the key in which everything in it is set, the glow that suffuses everything here in the dawn of an expected new day. … There is therefore only one real problem in Christian theology, which its object forces upon it and which it in turn forces on mankind and on human thought: the problem of the future. For the element of otherness that encounters us in the hope of the Old and New Testaments – the thing we cannot already think out and picture for ourselves on the basis of the given world and of the experiences we already have of the world – is one that confronts us with a promise of something new and with the hope of a future given by God. The God spoken of here is … the "God of hope" … the God whom we therefore cannot really have in us or over us but always only before us, who encounters us in his promises for the future, and whom we therefore cannot "have" either, but can only await in active hope. A proper theology would therefore have to be constructed in the light of its future goal. Eschatology should not be its end, but its beginning.' (Moltmann 1993f:16, [*Author's own emphasis*]).

17.'To reprint a book after twenty-five years and to send it out into the world again with a new preface is a risky affair. Books too have their own time … With *Theology of Hope* I evolved a theological method. … I tried to see *the whole of theology in a single focus*. … To draw theology together to a single point like this … leads to one-sidedness. But the person who is caught up in a discussion, who wants to speak to a particular situation, cannot be complete and harmoniously balanced. In standing up for one's own concern one must over-emphasize, putting one's own viewpoint over against others, if need be polemically' (Moltmann 1993f:8, 11).

18.'Christian eschatology does not speak of the future as such. It sets out from a definite reality in history and announces the future of that reality, its future possibilities and its power over the future. Christian eschatology speaks of Jesus Christ and *his* future' (Moltmann 1993f::17).

19.'Hope finds in Christ not only a consolation in suffering, but also the protest of the divine promise against suffering' (Moltmann 1993f:21); 'The expectation of the promised future of the kingdom of God which is coming to man and world to set them right and create life, makes us ready to expend ourselves unrestrainedly and unreservedly in love and in work of the reconciliation of the world with God and his future' (Moltmann 1993f:33).

20.'"Christianity" has its essence and its goal not in itself and not in its own existence, but lives from something and exists for something which reaches far beyond itself. If we would grasp the secret of its existence and its modes of behaviour; we must enquire into its mission. If we would fathom its essence, then we must enquire into that future on which it sets its hopes and expectations. … The Christian Church is oriented towards the future of the Lord, and receives itself and its own nature always only in expectation and hope from the coming of the Lord who is ahead of it, then its life and suffering, its work and action in the world and upon the world, must also be determined by the open foreland of its hopes for the world' (Moltmann 1993f:325, 326).

21.'Hope's statements of promise anticipate the future. In the promises, the hidden future already announces itself and exerts its influence on the present through the hope it awakens. … Hope's statements of promise … must stand in contradiction to the reality which can at present be experienced. They do not result from experiences but are the condition for the possibility of new experiences. … Present and future, experience and hope, stand in contradiction to each other in Christian eschatology, with the result that man … is drawn into the conflict between hope and experience. … The contradiction to the existing reality of himself and his world in which man is placed by hope is the very contradiction out of which this hope itself is born' (Moltmann 1993g:18).

By the time of *Der gekreuzigte Gott* (Moltmann 1972), this theological protest deepens into a theology of divine solidarity. If *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Moltmann 1964) revealed the eschatological disruption, *Der gekreuzigte Gott* reveals that God is not absent from the site of rupture, but is most intimately present within it. The cross is not merely a symbol of suffering, but the place where divine love embraces historical catastrophe. Here, crisis is not simply a precondition for hope; it is the very site where God's transformative nearness is revealed. The eschatological structure of time is thus bound to the suffering of the world – and theology becomes a witness to God's pathos.[22]

This configuration of rupture continues in Moltmann's later work, but with new nuance. In *Das Kommen Gottes*, Moltmann (1995) reflects on the eschatological horizon not merely as disruption, but as creation's fulfilment.[23] Still, this fulfilment does not erase crisis – it gathers it into a new vision of time shaped by resurrection and Sabbath. The apocalyptic remains present, but it no longer stands alone.[24] Instead, it is integrated into a broader framework of divine promise.[25]

For Moltmann, time is not neutral, not contained; it is charged with theological significance – marked by divine judgement, imbued with promise and open to transformation. South African Kairos theology, shaped by its struggle against apartheid and attuned to the pressing demands of a historical crisis, offered a powerful reading of time as a moment of decision. Yet, its theological vision can be enriched by Moltmann's more expansive eschatological account of time – one that refuses to separate the experience of suffering from the hope of new creation, and that interprets crisis not only as rupture, but as the threshold of divine renewal.

Promise and hope?

If Moltmann's early theology begins in the rupture of history, it does not remain there. The moment of crisis opens onto the horizon of promise – not as consolation or closure, but as an invitation to hope in spite of and through the brokenness of time. This movement from rupture to hope is not linear, but dialectical: promise is born and hope arises not from what is visible, but from the future of God that interrupts what is.

In *Theologie der Hoffnung*, Moltmann (1964) develops a theology of time shaped by the structure of promise. Promise is not a mere announcement of what will happen. It is a performative word that reconfigures the meaning of the present. In promising, God opens the future and thereby renders the present provisional. Time, in this view, is not a neutral container of events but is itself restructured by God's eschatological coming. Human history, therefore, is not a progression towards fulfilment, but a field of tension between promise and realisation. Christian hope lives from this tension.[26]

This structure of promise transforms the logic of theological knowledge. Theology is no longer the description of timeless truths but the anticipation of what is still on the way. Christian faith becomes an eschatological existence: it lives towards the coming of the kingdom, sustained by the memory of the resurrection and the promise of new creation.[27]

22.'The theology of the cross is none other than the reverse side of the Christian theology of hope. … *Theology of Hope* began with the *resurrection* of the crucified Christ, and I am now turning to look at the *cross* of the risen Christ. I was concerned then with the remembrance of Christ in the form of the *hope* of his future, and now I am concerned with hope in the form of the *remembrance* of his death. The dominant theme then was that of *anticipations* of the future of God in the form of promises and hopes; here it is the understanding of the *incarnation* of the future, by way of the sufferings of Christ, *in the world's sufferings*' (Moltmann 1993d:5, [*Author's own emphasis*]). In *The passion of Christ and the suffering of God*, he argued that '… the passionately loving Christ, the persecuted Christ, the lonely Christ, the tortured Christ, the Christ who suffered at the silence of God, this Christ is our Brother, the Friend which can be trusted with everything, because he knows and has suffered everything that may come our way. … When Christ the Son of God suffered *dying*, the Father of Jesus Christ suffered the death of his only beloved Son. If the Son dies godforsaken on the cross, the Father also suffers the forsakenness of the Son. Thus they both suffer, but not in the same way: Christ suffers *dying*, God suffers the death of his Son. The *passion of Christ* also affects God himself and becomes the *passion of God*. … If God the Father was in Christ the Son, then the sufferings of Christ are also God's sufferings and God also experiences death in Christ's cross. … God goes with us, he suffers with us. Therefore, wherever Christ the Son of God goes, the Father goes with him. In the Son's sacrifice we can therefore also recognize the sacrifice of God. … Christ dies with a shout directed to God, who he feels has forsaken him. Where is God in the events at Golgotha? He is in the dying Christ. There are many answers to the question of "why," none of them completely adequate. The question of "where" is more important; its answer is Christ himself. … If God goes where Christ goes, if God himself was in Christ, then Christ brings God's fellowship to those who have been as humiliated and made to be nothing as he was. … The *sufferings of Christ* are not exclusively his sufferings, but rather are *inclusively* our sufferings and the sufferings of this time. His cross stands in a brotherly way amongst our crosses, as a sign that God himself participates in our sufferings and he himself bears our pains. The "suffering Son of Man" has become so very much one of us that the countless, nameless tortured and forsaken people in the world are his brothers and sisters. … Therefore no suffering can separate us from our fellowship with the God who suffers with us. The God of Jesus Christ is the God of solidarity with those who are victimized and those who suffer. … When people cry out in their pain they can discover that they are joining in Christ's loud cry at his death. They discover in the suffering Christ the compassionate God who understands. When someone discovers this, then he or she realizes that God is not the cold, distant force of destiny that some accuse him of being, but rather that, in Christ, he has become the human God who shouts with us and in us and speaks up for us when we are silenced by our anguish. The God incarnate has made our life a part of his life and has made our suffering his suffering. Therefore, in our pain we participate in his pain, and in our grief we participate in his grief' (Moltmann 1993b:23, 24, 25, 26). For more detail, for example, Moltmann (1993h:151–212). Also see Moltmann (1993c) for the extended argument.

23.'*Christian* eschatology has nothing to do with apocalyptic "final solutions" … for its subject is not "the end" at all. On the contrary, what it is about is the new creation of all things. Christian eschatology is the remembered hope of the raising of the crucified Christ, so it talks about beginning afresh in the deadly end. … Christian eschatology follows this christological pattern … in the end is the beginning. … I have deliberately avoided calling this book about Christian eschatology "The Last Things" or "The End of All Things," but have given it the title: *The Coming of God*. In God's creative future, the end will become the beginning, and the true creation is still to come and is ahead of us' (Moltmann 1993d:xi). And later: 'In this book on eschatology, the different horizons of eternal life, the eternal kingdom and the eternal creation draw together to a single focus: *the cosmic Shekinah of God*. … In this doctrine about the future I am focusing attention on the goal of God's eschatological Shekinah, in which the whole creation will be new and eternally living, and every created thing will with unveiled face arrive at its own self. … None of us are given hope just for ourselves. The hope of Christians is always … hope for the peoples of the world as well; the hope of the peoples of the world is always also hope for this earth and everything that lives in it. And hope for the whole community of creation is ultimately hope that its Creator and Redeemer will arrive at his goal, and may find in creation his home' (Moltmann 1993d:xiii).

24.'Apocalypticism belongs to eschatology, not to history. And yet eschatology begins with apocalypticism: there is no beginning of a new world without the end of this old one, there is no kingdom of God without judgement on godlessness, there is no rebirth of the cosmos without "the birth pangs of the End-time." The raising of Christ from the dead presupposes his real and total death. It is from this fact that Christian apocalyptic takes its bearings: his real end was his true beginning' (Moltmann 1993d:227).

25.'Theologically, do we have to make a double – and inherent paradoxical – statement of reality, saying that the end is still to come *and* the new world is present? Theologically, that is correct, because the Christian shift in the phases of the aeon leads to an overlapping simultaneity between the old aeon, which is still moving towards its end, and the new aeon, which has already begun' (Moltmann 1993d: 232).

26.'What could here be experienced as "history" in the potential changes of reality always reached as far as the promises of God stretched men's memories and expectations. … This fact of God's accompanying his people, however, was always seen within the area of tension between a manifest promise on the one hand and the expected redeeming of this promise on the other' (Moltmann 1993f:107).

27.'If the coming kingdom is present in history as liberating rule, this liberating rule of God is manifest in his promises and in the proclamation of the gospel. The promises call people out of the environment in which they have settled down and put them on the path to the fulfilment of the promises. They free people from earthly slavery and call them to take the road to freedom. The gospel calls men and women out of the bondage of sin, law and death and puts them on the road to righteousness and

Hope thus acquires a critical function. It resists a theology that accommodates suffering, that explains away suffering, that accepts suffering as inevitable.[28]

This hope is not abstract. It is historically located and politically charged. Moltmann insists that the promise of God is *for the world* – for the transformation of structures and the liberation of the oppressed. Christian eschatology, in this frame, becomes a theology of active anticipation, a praxis of resistance rooted in the promise that God's future is not the extension of the present but its radical transfiguration.

This eschatological-political dimension is deepened in *Gott in der Schöpfung* (Moltmann 1985), where Moltmann reconfigures time as the open field of divine indwelling.[29] Here, promise is no longer just a word spoken into history; it becomes constitutive of creation itself. Creation is not static but dynamic, a space of divine possibility, where the Spirit sustains all things towards the promised consummation.[30] The Sabbath – no longer the cessation of time but its sanctification – becomes the temporal image of this hope: a time already infused with God's rest, already bearing the eschatological horizon within itself.[31]

This leads Moltmann to rethink temporality in relational terms. Time is not linear succession, but participatory openness. The Spirit is not simply a power that enters history; the Spirit is time's freedom. The Spirit is woven into the very structure of temporality. Time is not closed, it has freedom, an openness to the new. The Spirit is this openness itself, the condition that makes real future possible. It is in this light that the promise takes on its deepest theological significance: it is the mode in which God draws creation into the divine life[32] without overriding its freedom.[33]

In *Trinität und Reich Gottes* (Moltmann 1980), this becomes even more explicit. The God who promises is not a distant sovereign but a Triune communion. The eschatological future is not merely an event but the fullness of divine relationality. Time is not redeemed by being ended, but by being drawn into the perichoretic life of God – a life defined not by possession, but by mutual self-giving. In this sense, the divine promise is not only about what will be; it is about who God is: the One who remains faithful, who does not abandon the world, and who draws history into God's love.[34]

Christian hope, rooted in the divine promise, signifies a transformed way of dwelling in time. South African Kairos theology, which emerged from the immediacy of political crisis, articulated a powerful vision of kairos as a moment of reckoning. Moltmann's theology of promise does not supplant this vision but enriches it – offering a deeper framework in which kairos is seen not only as a crisis point, but as a theological structure: the inbreaking of divine promise into historical time, making it receptive to the possibility of new creation.

Relationality and participation?

Moltmann's theology does not remain with disruption or promise alone. The eschatological opening of time finds its telos not in the abstract future, but in the communion of life. The movement of divine time is participatory and relational.

(Footnote 27 continues…)
the freedom of eternal life. Because this road is not yet the goal, it leads to tribulation, resistance, suffering and struggle. The path's goal only sheds its light on the path: redemption in tribulation, the victory of life in the struggle against the power of death, ultimate freedom in the resistance against servitude. The kingdom of God is present in faith and new obedience, in new fellowship and the powers of the Spirit. The presence of the Holy Spirit is to be understood as the earnest and beginning of the new creation of all things in the kingdom of God. God rules through word and faith, promise and hope, commandment and obedience, power and Spirit' (Moltmann 1993b:191).

28.'It is *in* contradiction that hope must prove its power. Hence eschatology is forbidden to ramble, and must formulate its statements of hope in contradiction to our present experience of suffering, evil and death. For that reason it will hardly ever be possible to develop an eschatology on its own. It is much more important to present hope as the foundation and the mainspring of theological thinking as such, and to introduce the eschatological perspective into our statements on divine revelation, on the resurrection of Christ, on the mission of faith and on history' (Moltmann 1993f:19, [*Author's own emphasis*]). And later: 'Christ is not merely consolation in life that is full of distress and doomed to die, but it is also God's contradiction of suffering and death, of humiliation and offence, and of the wickedness of evil. Hope finds in Christ not only consolation *in* suffering, but also protest of the divine promise *against* suffering. … Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it' (Moltmann 1993f:21).

29.'The messianic doctrine of creation sees creation together with its future – the future for which it was made and in which it will be perfected. … "Creation in the beginning" is an open creation, and its consummation will be to become the home and dwelling place of God … Human beings already experience the indwellings of God in the Spirit here in history, even if as yet only partially and provisionally. That is why they hope that the kingdom of God will dwell entirely and wholly and for ever in his creation, and will allow all the beings he has created to participate in the fullness of his eternal life. The embodiment of the messianic promises to the poor and the quintessence of the hopes of the alienated is that the world should be "home" … If the creative God himself dwells in his creation, then he is making it his own home … All created being then find in nearness to him the inexhaustible wellspring of their life, and for their part find home and rest in God' (Moltmann 1993a:5).

30.'The God who created the world and sustains it, and who invites it to the repose of his sabbath feast, also allows the world to exist before, with and *in* the presence of his infinite Being. In this respect God is the eternal dwelling place of his creation. But the God who has made the world through his wisdom, and keeps it in existence through his Spirit, has always entered into it as well. *God the Spirit* dwells in creation, preparing it … We must only distinguish between the one indwelling and the other. They are not the same, and they do not take place on the same level. … God and the world are related to one another through the relationship of their mutual indwelling and participation: God's indwelling in the world is divine in kind; the world's indwelling in God is worldly in kind' (Moltmann 1993a:150).

31.'The doctrine of the sabbath of creation becomes the identifying mark of the biblical doctrine of creation, distinguishing it from the interpretation of the world as nature. It is the sabbath which manifests the world's identify as creation, sanctifies it and blesses it' (Moltmann 1993a:276).

32.'An ecological doctrine of creation implies a new kind of thinking about God. The center of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. The center is the recognition of the presence of God *in* the world and the presence of the world *in* God. … An ecological doctrine of creation today must perceive and teach God's *immanence* in the world. … The trinitarian doctrine of creation does not start from an antithesis between God and the world … It proceeds … from an immanent *tension* in God himself: God creates the world, and at the same time manifests himself through its being. It lives from his creative power, and yet he lives in it. … The God who is transcendent in relation to the world, and the God who is immanent in that world are one and the same God' (Moltmann 1993a:13, 15).

33.'[God] gives himself away to the beings he created. … The God who … dwells in his creation is present to every one of his creatures and remains bound to each of them. … In the free, overflowing rapture of his love the eternal God goes out of himself and makes a creation, a reality, which is there as he is there, and is yet different from himself. … The overflowing love from which everything comes that is from God, is also the implicit ground for God's readiness to endure the contradictions of the beings he created. … Our starting point here is that all relationships which are analogous to God reflect the … reciprocal indwelling and mutual interpenetration of the trinitarian perichoresis: God *in* the world and the world *in* God … woman and man in the kingdom of unconditional and unconditioned love, freed to be true and complete human beings' (Moltmann 1993a:15, 17).

34.'The expression "experience of God" does not only mean our experience of God; it also means God's experience with us. Consequently we are not using the concept of experience in quite the same way in both cases. God experiences people in a different way from the way people experience God. He experiences them in his divine manner of experience. The Bible is the testimony of God's history with men and women, and also the testimony of God's experiences with men and women. If a person experiences in faith how God has experienced – and still experiences – him, for that person God … is the living God. He learns to know himself in the mirror of God's love, suffering and joy. In his experience of God he experiences … something of God's own experience with him. The more he understands God's experience, the more deeply the mystery of God's passion is revealed to him. He then perceives that the history of the world is the history of God's suffering. At the moments of God's profoundest revelation there is always suffering. … If a person once feels the infinite passion of God's love which finds expression here, then he understands the mystery of the triune God. God suffers with us – God suffers from us – God suffers for us: it is this experience of God that reveals the triune God' (Moltmann 1993e:4).

The promise that ruptures historical time is ultimately oriented towards a reconciled relationality – the perichoretic life of God extended to creation. In this theological vision, time becomes the medium through which divine love gathers creation into the life of God without erasing its difference.

In *Trinität und Reich Gottes*, Moltmann (1980) describes the Triune God not as a closed circle of metaphysical perfection, but as an open communion of persons. The doctrine of perichoresis – mutual indwelling without confusion – becomes the conceptual grammar for understanding relational time. Each person of the Trinity exists not through isolation, but through reciprocal self-giving.[35] The divine life is movement, giving and receiving, freedom-in-communion.[36] When time is drawn into this life, it is no longer governed by chronology or linearity.

This reframing of divine life transforms the meaning of temporality. No longer is time merely the arena in which salvation history unfolds; it becomes the space in which God desires to dwell with creatures. In *Gott in der Schöpfung* (1985), Moltmann retrieves the motif of divine indwelling to reimagine creation not as a distant object of divine governance, but as the very space of God's relational presence.[37] Time, in this ecological theology, becomes part of the 'open system' of creation – not reducible to mechanical causality, but oriented towards divine presence and transformation.

Here, relationality is not limited to the divine persons. It extends outward to include all of creation. The Spirit who indwells and animates creation makes possible a participatory time – a time in which all creatures live not in isolation but in dynamic interrelation. The Sabbath becomes the temporal expression of this divine relationality: a time of rest not as cessation, but as presence, as dwelling-with, as the harmonisation of creaturely and divine rhythms.

This theology reaches a mature pneumatological expression in *Der Geist des Lebens: Eine ganzheitliche Pneumatologie* (Moltmann 1991). The Spirit is the presence of God in the world, the breath of life in all living beings, and the dynamism of time itself. Time is no longer conceived as a neutral container of events, but as the living openness through which the Spirit works.[38] Participation becomes the mode of temporality: creatures are drawn into the divine life not through absorption, but through indwelling and communion. This is a radically relational understanding of time – time as the shared space between God and world, between memory and expectation.[39]

Within this framework, eschatological hope no longer functions as future projection alone. It is embedded in present relationality. The future is not simply what lies ahead; it is already encountered in every act of solidarity, justice and communal joy. The Spirit binds history into a relational economy, where hope is lived not only towards the end, but within the middle – within the shared life of the world and the divine.[40]

This account of relational time provides a profound deepening of Kairos theology. While the Kairos Document perceptively identified the moment of crisis and the urgency of moral decision, Moltmann's theological framework expands this vision by portraying kairos not only as a time of rupture, but also as a time of relation. It marks the moment in which God's life approaches – not as a final verdict, but as a gracious invitation. Confronted with pervasive fragmentation – whether political, social or ecological – this theology does more than offer protest; it gestures towards the promise of participation. It speaks of being drawn into a temporality not of our own making, yet one oriented towards God's shared and redemptive future.

Rhythm and direction?

Moltmann's theology of time is not only shaped by rupture and promise, but by the conviction that time carries within it a divine rhythm. This rhythm is not mechanical repetition, nor a linear unfolding towards progress, but the living pulse of creation sustained by God's own presence. In this sense, time is structured by the dynamic interplay of rest and movement, promise and memory, creation and fulfilment. Moltmann's later theology gives increasing attention to this rhythmic character of time – not as an abstract sequence of moments, but as a medium of divine life.

35.'God is love; love makes a person capable of suffering; and love's capacity for suffering is fulfilled in the self-giving and the self-sacrifice of the lover. Self-sacrifice is God's very nature and essence. … He is the lover, the beloved and the love itself. … Love has to give, for it is only in the act of giving that it truly possesses, and finds bliss. That is why God has to give himself; and he cannot possess himself apart from this act of serving. God has to give himself completely; and it is only in this way that he is God. He has to go through time …' (Moltmann 1993e:32, 33).

36.'The triune God reveals himself as love in the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. His freedom therefore lies in the friendship which he offers men and women, and through which he makes them his friends. His freedom is his vulnerable love, his openness, the encountering kindness through which he suffers with the human beings he loves and becomes their advocate, thereby throwing open their future to them. God demonstrates his eternal freedom through his suffering and his sacrifice, through his self-giving and his patience. Through his freedom he keeps man, his image, and his world, creation, free – keeps them free and pays the price of their freedom. Through his freedom he waits for man's love, for his compassion, for his own deliverance to his glory through man. Through his freedom he does not only speak as Lord, but listens to men and women as their Father' (Moltmann 1993e:56).

37.'In a deeper sense it is a reference to the symbolism of "home" and "dwelling" which I have employed in this book. According to its Greek derivation, the word "ecology" means "the doctrine of the house." What does the Christian doctrine of creation have to do with "a doctrine of the house?" … If we understand the Creator, his creation, and the goal of that creation in a trinitarian sense, then the Creator, through his Spirit, *dwells in* his creation as a whole, and in every … created being … holding them together and keeping them in life. The inner secret of creation is the *indwelling of God*, just as the inner secret of the sabbath of creation is *God's rest*. If we ask about creation's goal and future, we ultimately arrive at the transfiguring indwelling of the triune God in his creation' (Moltmann 1993a:xiv).

38.'The new foundation of the eschatology which takes its bearings from the future by way of the "theology of hope" … develops eschatology as the horizon of expectation for the historical experience of the divine Spirit. … The Holy Spirit is … the power that raises the dead, the power of the new creation of al things' (Moltmann 2001:7).

39.'Life in the Spirit is a life in the "broad place" … So in the new life we experience the Spirit as a "broad place" – as the free space for our freedom, as the living space for our lives, as the horizon inviting us to discover life. "The broad place" is the most hidden and most silent presence of God's Spirit in us and round about us. But how else could 'life in the Spirit' be understood, if the Spirit were not the space "in" which life can grow and unfurl? We explore the depths of this space through trust … We search out the length of this space through extravagant hope. We discover the breadth of this space through the torrents of love which we receive and give' (Moltmann 2001:178).

40.'By experience of the Spirit I mean an awareness of God in, with and beneath the experience of life, which gives us assurance of God's fellowship, friendship and love. I am choosing the phrase "experience of the Spirit" as a way of understanding appropriately the intermediate state of every *historical experience* between remembered past and expected future. The experience, life and fellowship of God's Spirit come into being when Christ is made present and when new creation of all things is anticipated. These are resonances of Christ, and a prelude to the kingdom of God. The experience of the Spirit is never without the remembrance of Christ, and never without the expectation of his future' (Moltmann 2001:17).

In *Gott in der Schöpfung*, Moltmann (1985) draws on the biblical motif of the Sabbath to offer a reconfiguration of time's deepest structure. The Sabbath is not merely the cessation of work but the sanctification of time itself. It marks the moment when God does not withdraw from creation but dwells within it – when creation is not driven by utility or productivity, but welcomed into rest, joy, and communion. The Sabbath becomes the rhythm that structures all time: not as interruption, but as fulfilment.[41] It resists the tyranny of endless activity and opens time to the experience of divine indwelling.

This sabbatical rhythm carries both ethical and eschatological weight. It resists the commodification of time in modern life and asserts the theological truth that time is not owned but given. It also prefigures the eschaton: a time when creation will be fully gathered into God's rest. Time, then, becomes not only a medium of history, but a vessel of promise – directed not towards exhaustion, but towards rest and renewal.[42]

This rhythm is further deepened in *Der Geist des Lebens*, where Moltmann (1991) interprets the resurrection as the event that inaugurates a new time altogether. The resurrection does not simply reverse death; it opens a new dimension of life in time. It introduces a rhythm of transformation into the world – a rhythm that interrupts the cycle of violence and death, and makes possible a life animated by the Spirit.[43] The Spirit becomes the breath of temporal renewal, the one who moves history not by force but by promise, not by necessity but by hope.

For Moltmann, this means that time is no longer governed by a closed logic of cause and effect. It is now inhabited by the Spirit, who opens each moment to the possibility of new life.[44] The direction of time is shaped not by the weight of the past, but by the pull of the future – a future made present through the Spirit's indwelling. Time becomes participatory: it invites creation into the unfolding of God's redemptive presence.

In *Das Kommen Gottes* (Moltmann 1995), this vision reaches its eschatological horizon. The fulfilment of time is not its annihilation, but its transfiguration. The new creation is not the abandonment of history, but its healing. Eternity is not timelessness; it is the fullness of time – time gathered into the life of God without loss or reduction.[45] In this vision, the rhythms of Sabbath, resurrection, and renewal are not temporary patterns. They are signs of the world's true direction: towards communion, justice and joy.

For South African Kairos theology, which rightly recognised the urgency of decisive historical moments, Moltmann's theology of rhythm and direction offers a deeper understanding of how such moments are encompassed within God's own temporal movement. Kairos is not merely a rupture in history; it is also a summons to inhabit time differently – to attune one's life to a rhythm shaped by rest, resistance, and the renewing work of the Spirit. It is this rhythm that imparts direction to time and renders the task of discernment not only possible, but essential.

Fulfilment and discernment?

Moltmann's theology never treats time as a container waiting to be filled, nor as a mechanism grinding towards closure. Instead, time is shaped by God's eschatological promise – not merely a future endpoint, but a fulfilment that interrupts, transforms, and draws history into new life. The theological grammar of time reaches its fullest articulation in the interplay between fulfilment and discernment. Time is not only to be endured, but interpreted – not only to be measured, but inhabited.

In *Theologie der Hoffnung* (Moltmann 1964), fulfilment is never collapse into finality, but the overflowing of promise. The structure of eschatological hope is not linear consummation, but open movement – the kind that keeps faith from petrifying into doctrine and history from lapsing into resignation. To hope is not to know the timetable of God; it is to dwell within a horizon shaped by promise. The temporal movement is not from A to B, but from the present towards the coming of God. This movement demands the ongoing discernment of signs – kairotic moments through which the Spirit stirs and the promise reasserts itself in concrete histories.

Discernment, in this context, is theological: it is not merely political strategy or psychological insight, but spiritual perception formed by the Word and attuned to the Spirit. In *Der Geist des Lebens*, Moltmann (1991) argues that the Spirit

41.'The goal and completion of every … Christian doctrine of creation must be the doctrine of the sabbath; for on the sabbath and through the sabbath God "completed" his creation, and on the sabbath and through it, men and women perceive as God's creation the reality in which they live and which they themselves are. The sabbath opens creation for its true future. … The sabbath is itself the presence of eternity in time, and a foretaste of the world to come. … According to the biblical traditions creation and the sabbath belong together. It is impossible to understand the world properly as creation without a proper discernment of the sabbath. In the sabbath stillness men and women no longer intervene … They let it be entirely God's creation. … The sabbath, which is for the whole creation, opens that creation for the coming kingdom of God' (Moltmann 1993a:276, 277, 288).

42.'If the reason for the Christian feast-day is that it is the day of Christ's resurrection, and hence "the Lord's day," then this very reasoning makes it clear that the day anticipates, not merely the sabbath rest of the End-time, but also the beginning of "the new creation." According to the Christian view, the new creation begins with the raising of Christ from the dead, for the new creation is the world of the resurrection of the dead. … If we may be permitted to distribute the weight of the "completing" and the "beginning" in this way between the seventh day and the first, then the day of creation's completion is open for the day of the new creation, and the first day of the new creation has as its precondition the day when the original creation was completed' (Moltmann 1993a:294, 295).

43.'God's Spirit is the life-force of the resurrection which, starting from Easter, is poured out on al flesh in order to make it eternally alive. In the tempest of the divine Spirit of life, the final springtime of creation begins, and the men and women who already experience it here and now sense that life has come alive again and is worth loving' (Moltmann 2001:84). And elsewhere: 'The redeeming Spirit is the Spirit of the resurrection and new creation of all things. … To experience the power of the resurrection, and to have to do with this divine energy, does not lead to a non-sensuous and inward-turned spirituality, hostile to the body and detached from the world. It brings the new vitality of a love for life' (Moltmann 2001:9).

44.'If new life is experienced and lived in the Spirit, then the Spirit is … the medium and space for experience. … The Spirit is the broad place in which we have experiences. … These experiences are thought of as re*birth* or as being *born* again' (Moltmann 2001:157).

45.'The new creation is defined through a new divine presence within it. The Creator no longer remains over against creation. He dwells in it, and finds in it his rest. This makes the new creation a sacramental world. It is interpenetrated by divine presence, and participates in the inexhaustible fulness of God's life. The indwelling of God calls into being a kind of cosmic *perichoresis* of divine and cosmic attributes. In that new aeon a mutual perichoresis between eternity and time also comes into existence, so that on the one hand we can talk about "eternal time" and on the other about "eternity filled with time"' (Moltmann 1993d:295).

not only gives life, but makes life intelligible. The Spirit is the one who discloses what time is for, who reveals the shape of time from within – not in abstraction, but in lived, bodily, historical existence. Discernment is thus pneumatological: the gift to perceive where death is clothed in life, where endings may be beginnings, and where the promise of resurrection interrupts the logic of despair.

This attentiveness to fulfilment becomes central in *Das Kommen Gottes*, where Moltmann (1995) offers his most sustained eschatology. Fulfilment is neither utopia nor apocalypse. It is not a project brought about by human progress, nor an annihilation imposed from above. Instead, fulfilment is communion – the world made home for God, and God dwelling fully with creation. The eschaton is not the end of time, but the perfection of time, time's own liberation into eternity. Eternity is not the negation of temporality, but its transfiguration. In this vision, fulfilment gathers all fragments of suffering, resistance, and hope into a form of life no longer defined by Sabbath.[46]

Yet, this is not a passive waiting. In *Erinnerungen in der Theologie: Beiträge zur Systematischen Theologie* (Moltmann 2000), Moltmann insists that the practice of theology must remain eschatologically alert: a thinking and living that begins in the end. The theologian is not the one who surveys time from a distance, but the one who walks in its tension, discerning the movements of God's promise in contexts often marked by violence, exclusion, and despair. Theology thus becomes a form of attentiveness – a readiness to perceive the kairos within chronos.[47]

South African Kairos theology has long grappled with the tension inherent in discerning decisive historical moments – those points in time through which injustice is exposed and actively resisted. Yet, Moltmann's theology of fulfilment extends this vision by pressing the question further: every kairos moment also demands reflection on the kind of future being made possible, and by whom it is shaped. To speak theologically of time is to ask not only where we stand in history, but towards what end – and in whose company – we are moving. Discernment, therefore, involves more than the recognition of crisis; it entails attentiveness to grace within the crisis – the grace that does not offer escape from time, but holds the promise of its redemption.

46.'The sabbath in the time of the first creation links this world and the world to come. It is *the presence of God* in the *time* of those he has created or, to put it more precisely, the dynamic presence of eternity in time, which links beginning and end, thus awakening remembrance and hope. The eschatological indwelling of God in the new heaven and the new earth is the *presence of God* in the *space* of his created beings. … The eschatological Shekinah is the perfected sabbath in the spaces of the world. Sabbath and Shekinah are related to each other as promise and fulfilment, beginning and completion. In the sabbath, creation holds within itself from the beginning the true promise of its consummation. In the eschatological Shekinah, the new creation takes the whole of the first creation into itself, as its own harbinger and prelude, and completes it. Creation begins with time and is completed in space. The temporality of the first creation is itself its promise, and its openness for the new, eternal creation' (Moltmann 1993d:266).

47.'Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a second chance, at least not the same chance a second time. We might also call the attention awakened and heightened through astonishment and wonder literally *presence of mind*. It lets us take the unique opportunity "by the forelock," like the *kairos* in Greek pictures. *To live attentively* means to be open for surprises and for what is new in every moment. It means experiencing life full of expectation, dis-covering anew the reality we encounter' (Moltmann 2000b:337).

Conclusion

The 1985 *Kairos Document* emerged from a moment of profound rupture in South African history. It identified the present as a *kairos*, a moment of truth that demanded prophetic response. Moltmann's theology was likewise shaped by crisis. In this shared sensibility, both the *Kairos Document* and Moltmann regard *kairos* not merely as a crisis, but as a summons to *theological* responsibility.[48]

Yet, *kairos* is not exhausted by crisis. Moltmann's theology expands its grammar to include promise and hope. For him, time is not only ruptured by judgement; it is also opened by promise. The future is not the product of historical inevitability, but the eruption of divine possibility. While the *Kairos Document* speaks powerfully of God's judgement, Moltmann insists that these are not the final words. Theological reflection on time must also be voiced in the future tense of hope – in the expectation that what is not yet may come to be, that God is already preparing something new. This perspective does not diminish the urgency of *kairos*; rather, it enlarges its horizon.

Moltmann's Trinitarian theology also complicates any individualistic portrayal of prophetic action. *Kairos* is never discerned in isolation. The coming of God is not an imposition from above, but a participatory movement that draws people into relational engagement. The Spirit does not descend upon solitary prophets alone; the Spirit forms communities of shared life, shared struggle, and shared discernment. In a deeply fractured society such as South Africa, the call to *kairos* must involve a reimagining of participation – raising theological questions not only about who speaks, but also with whom, for whom, and towards what kind of future. Moltmann's Trinitarian vision – grounded in mutuality, love, and relationality – offers a necessary corrective to readings of *kairos* that risk isolating insight from communal responsibility. It reframes the moment of *kairos* as one of collective imagination and shared accountability.

Moreover, not all *kairoi* manifest with the clarity of historical rupture. Many of the pressing urgencies of our time unfold more gradually: ecological degradation, entrenched economic inequality, and the slow erosion of democratic trust. Here, Moltmann's theology of time provides important resources for reimagining *kairos* beyond crisis. His reflections on Sabbath, resurrection, and the Spirit reconfigure time not as panic, but as rhythm; not as collapse, but as directional movement. The task of theology, then, is not only to name the moment, but to discern its trajectory – to ask how and where God might be drawing history forward amid practices of rest, resistance, and renewal. In a South African context marked by fatigue and deferred hope, such a rhythmic theology of time may help reorient the *kairos* tradition from momentary interruption to sustained and faithful witness.

48.For example: 'Theology was to become aware of its responsibility in the church, and the church was to become aware of its theological responsibility. In that era of dictatorship, culture and scholarship were to find in the church a free space for truth, and the church and theology were to lay hold of their prophetic task in public life' (Moltmann 2009:254).

Finally, Moltmann's eschatology offers a vision of time's fulfilment that avoids both resignation and utopian idealism. Fulfilment is not understood as the cessation of time, but as its transformation. Theology, accordingly, is not merely concerned with interpreting the signs of the times, but with inhabiting them attentively – with discerning within them the nearness of God. While the *Kairos Document* called for prophetic theology in a moment of historical urgency, Moltmann invites a broader theological calling: to perceive not only the judgements of history, but also the gentle movements of grace; not only the *kairos* of confrontation, but also the *kairos* of becoming; not only what must end, but what may yet be born. In the complex and layered *kairoi* of contemporary South Africa, this trinitarian and pneumatological grammar of time may offer the theological depth required for a renewed generation of witness.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

Author's contribution

H.v.d.W. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author. The article does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder or agency of the author, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings and content.

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