

INTRODUCTION

**MA. MARICEL S. IBITA, REX F. FORTES AND
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Two-Edged Sword (Heb 4:12): The Bible on Violence and Evil in
the Context of the Philippines and the World

The phrase “two-edged sword” is mentioned at least six times in the Bible. In Psalm 149:6, God’s faithful is pictured as praising God and wielding a double-edged sword to deal vengeance on behalf of God’s people against the nations. In Proverbs 5:3-4, the lips and speech and person of a loose woman are compared with a two-edged sword: sweet, smooth, and deadly. Sirach advises turning away from sins, “All lawlessness is like a two-edged sword; there is no healing for the wound it inflicts” (Sir. 21:3). An apocalyptic imagery is recalled in Rev 1:16 with the Son of Man’s mouth described as the source of a two-edged sword, urging the visionary to write his praise and judgments to the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev 1:11, 2:12). Finally, we have the more known citation from Hebrew 4:12:

Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper
than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul
from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the
thoughts and intentions of the heart (Heb. 4:12 NRS)

What is common in all these citations is the battle between
good and evil, defiance and deviousness, and struggles outside and
within each person and/or community.

These commonalities are expressed in the main theme of
the 24th Annual Convention of the Catholic Biblical Association of

the Philippines (CBAP): Two-Edged Sword (Heb 4:12): The Word of God on Violence and Evil in the 21st Century. The Board of Trustees of the CBAP decided on this theme as the country and the world face a critical time in history when wars, oppression, impunity, and the like seem to be all-around. The theme underlines the individual and collective self-reflection and self-correction that the organization struggled with by asking for the relevance of God's Word in a world grappling with violence and evil. In the words of E.L. Johnson, God's Word has two natures: therapeutic and subversive. These two characteristics of God's Word imbue our learning and teaching, our preaching and prayers, and our life and witness.

In this edition of Hapag, we give the readers some of the thoughts of the presenters of the 24th CBAP Annual Convention, starting with global-planetary concerns to more contextual issues in the Philippines.

First, we establish our lens that the two-edged sword of the Scriptures flows from our belief in the resurrection of Jesus and that it is from the Risen Jesus that we receive the mission to preach God's Word, with its two-edged character, to our world beset with evil and violence.

How can God's word or voice empower one amidst the trauma of violence? Keynote speaker Niceta Vargas, OSA focuses on this question in her article "Mary Magdalene: An Icon of Inclusive Discipleship in the Traumatized Johannine Community and for Christians in the 21st Century". Through the narrative of Mary Magdalene in the Fourth Gospel, this paper argues that she symbolizes equal discipleship in the Johannine community and for modern Christians. It consists of three main sections. The first serves as an introduction. The second involves her characterization through literary analysis and her responses to Jesus. The third discusses her significance to 21st-century disciples. The study shows that Mary Magdalene was a beloved disciple of Jesus, witnessing his

death and resurrection. Despite her trauma, her love for Jesus empowered her as a leader and evangelizer, ultimately leading her to be known as the “Apostle to the Apostles.” This close reading of the encounter between the Risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene acknowledges, supports, and promotes the role of women in the Roman Catholic Church today, highlighting shared discipleship among all believers.

In response to and in continuation of the thoughts of this keynote address, we present the flow of the Proceedings from the cosmic-global-planetary concerns to more contextual issues in the Philippines.

John Paul Bolano's contribution is entitled “The Sabbath as a Subversive Response to Environmental/Ecological Violence? Lessons from Contemporary Ecological Biblical Hermeneutics.” This article directly addresses the climate emergency as violence against the created world. For him, if violence is framed as a forceful assault intended to damage or hurt humans, then Pope Francis’ intimation that violence against nature/non-human creation is likewise an assault against humanity as well, especially against the poor and the vulnerable (LS, 48). Bolano underlines that the present climate emergency is not merely brought about by changing climate patterns that the natural world experiences but is exacerbated by human activity. Numerous studies and evidence, most notably by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in 2023, have raised that “Human activities, principally through emissions of greenhouse gasses, have unequivocally caused global warming...with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and among individuals” (IPCC Climate Change Synthesis Report 2023). Such a forceful and disruptive system and course of human

activity can rightly be called ecological violence. How then can the Bible serve as a resource for responding to such violence?

Amidst the military, religious, ideological, and other forms of global violence, Rodel Magin, OSA turns to the oracles of salvation found in Isaiah 2:2-5 and Micah 4:1-5. Both biblical texts give a hopeful insight that God's rule can only take place when human society embraces the divine teaching. Magin highlights both prophets' emphasis on righteousness and mercy, showing us the way towards peace. In this intertextual study, Magin sought to define the biblical notion of *šālōm* present in both texts, especially in Isaiah 2:5 and Micah 4:4-5. He also highlighted the key differences in their depictions of *šālōm* through a more exegetical investigation. His study proposed how biblical *šālōm* can enrich advocacies for peace environment, peace media, peace gender, and peace education.

"Ano'ng Talata sa Biblia ang Bagay sa Dutertismo? Relihiyon bilang Kasangkapan sa Giyera Kontra Droga," written in Filipino, continues to grapple with how else to theologize about former president Duterte's war on drugs where various Bible verses were used by both supporters and opponents. Catholic bishops quoted "Thou shalt not kill," while Duterte's allies referenced "For the wages of sin is death." Villanueva's study explores the significance of these verses and critically asks, "What is the biblical verse most fitted to use in dealing with Dutertismo?" He suggests that lamentations from the Scriptures are particularly relevant as he likewise offers practical guidance on using and interpreting the Bible when dealing with violence and evil.

Using the enhanced pastoral cycle of SEE-JUDGE-ACT-EVALUATE-CELEBRATE/ RITUALIZE as a method for a more biblically rooted theologizing, Ma.Maricel S. Ibita suggests that in the face of collective and individual struggles against evil and violence, Christians need to reclaim the imprecatory psalms as a resource. In her contribution, "Lying Tongues, Thanking Mouths:

Reclaiming Imprecatory Psalms as Counter-Violence,” she locates this method of contextual hermeneutics alongside the global advances in biblical research such as social identity under/and empire studies, political biblical criticism, postcolonial pedagogy for biblical studies, return migration and exile/forced migration in biblical literature, racial-ethnic lenses (African, Asian, islanders, Korean, Latinx, etc.), Bible and practical theology, hermeneutics of trauma, ecological hermeneutics, gender and LGBTQI hermeneutics, minoritized criticism, slavery and resistance, ecology, and sustainability, politicization of the Bible and biblization of politics, cultural trauma, intersectionality (gender, class, race, sexuality and disability), museums in the Bible, and others. For her, a more grounded, holistic, and updated understanding of the imprecatory psalms challenges the notion that these psalms are “unchristian” and that they express doubts in the divine. Instead, Ibita underlines that these psalms articulate the rawness of emotions of the psalmist. These psalms which invoke judgment, misfortune, or curses, upon one’s enemies or those perceived as the enemies of God are *not* “unchristian” and should *not* be brushed off liturgically. She cites as an example her exploration of Psalm 109 from the lens of imprecation as Filipino *pagsusumbong sa Diyos* (Villanueva, *Psalms 1-72*, 2016).

The *double-edged swordlike* characteristic of the contribution of Rex Fortes, CM compares and contrasts the Roman period in the 1st century CE and the Philippine political arena in the present time. In his article “Is Caiaphas off the Hook?: A Historical-Critical and Postcolonial Analysis of John 11:50 and its Appropriation to Duterte’s Drug War,” Fortes delves into the representation of Caiaphas in the Johannine narrative. Fortes particularly investigates whether this religious figure was merely pressured by the Jewish public and the Sanhedrin into endorsing Jesus’ arrest. By comparing the general biblical illustration of the high priest with that of Flavius Josephus, the investigation shows that Caiaphas was

wily, shrewd, and malicious in orchestrating Jesus' crucifixion by the Romans. Employing the postcolonial approach of Warren Carter, Richard Horsley, and Tom Thatcher, the study underlines "the culpability of political enablers regardless of the degree of their involvement. Such would implicate Caiaphas for the arrest of Jesus in the same way as other political retainers worldwide are." In his appropriation of this reasoning in the Philippine context, Fortes argues that former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte can be implicated by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the thousands of deaths in the so-called Drug War during his administration.

While it is unfortunate that we as editors were not able to include some other topics presented at the 24th CBAP Annual Convention in this issue of *Hapag* due to some authors' previous publication commitments and time constraints, an overview of these presentations is merited to both share the insights of fellow scholars and document the entire convention theme.

The first keynote address, "Mass Violence and Cultural Trauma in Deuteronomistic Historiography," was given virtually by Dominik Markl, SJ from the University of Innsbruck, Austria. In this presentation, Markl explored how trauma theory can shed light on the political and religious aspects of the farewell address of Moses in Deuteronomy. Reflecting on how these complex concepts of trauma, politics, and religion continues to effect and affect our contemporary society, Markl also shares his own personal story of discovering that his grandfather was a member of the Gestapo (acronym of *Geheime Staatspolizei*, meaning Secret State Police) which served as the main machinery and instrument of Hitler even before the Nazi rose to power. His own struggle with intergenerational trauma guided him to find meaning on this horrible part of world history through his own biblical scholarship and his just concluded academic assignment at the Pontifical Biblical Institute and priestly ministry in Rome.

In “Dangers Ahead: Traces of Violence in the Lukan Infancy Narrative,” Ma. Marilou (Malou) S. Ibita reread the Annunciation narrative against the background of the violent rule of the Roman empire. Her study focused on the story of Mary’s pregnancy and childbirth journey found in Luke 1–2. At the popular level, the story of the Annunciation, the Visitation, and the birth of Jesus is part of the first three joyful mysteries of the Rosary, a well-loved prayer. However, despite these joyful impressions, her presentation posited that while the perils and violence are very explicit in Matthew’s infancy narrative, the Lukan version also reflects the violence within the Roman empire. Using narrative criticism enriched with empire, postcolonial, and feminist insights, Malou Ibita presented Mary as one who gives voice to the violence in the unfolding Lukan plot of the life story of Jesus.

For his part, Victor Nicdao’s presentation entitled “Paul’s ‘Thorn in the Flesh’: From Adversity to Wholeness. Wrestling with Historical Ambiguity and Hermeneutical Possibilities” approached Pauline scholarship from the lens of trauma hermeneutics. Taking the continuing uncertainty about the precise identification (=historical referent) of Paul’s “thorn in the flesh,” as a starting point, Nicdao’s first illustrated the value and limits of the historical-critical investigation. This historical ambiguity, however, did not mean the end of the task of interpretation. Quite the contrary, Nicdao showed how it served as a historical nudge to explore other areas of history relevant to the text (J. Larson, 2004; C.R. Moss, 2012). In this perspective, historical ambiguity becomes a hermeneutical advantage because of the possibilities of interpretation it opens. More consequential than solving the riddle of the “thorn in the flesh” is exploring the various hermeneutical possibilities that the historical ambiguity engenders. Finally, Nicdao argued that the hermeneutical possibilities allow the interpreter to enter the narrative world of the text and appropriate its meaning to the life situation of present-day readers. In some

recent interpretations, Nicdao pointed out, the story of Paul's "thorn in the flesh," functions as a potent and stirring symbol of the struggle from trauma and how one can come to terms with it (S.H. Polaski, 2008), and from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to healing and wholeness (P.Y. Clark, 2016). Paul's experience of the "thorn in the flesh," represents a story of courage sustained by God's sufficient grace that will be helpful to present-day believers in their journey of overcoming their suffering. This experience exemplifies symbolically the accounts of people in difficult situations as they transition from adversity to wholeness.

Marco Guiriba's investigation, "A Theological Discourse On Marriage in Ephesians 5: 21-33: An Appropriation of the Canonical Method of James A. Sanders," zeroes in on power struggles and distribution within the basic unit of society, the family and homes. Employing the historical-critical method, Guiriba inquires whether the Ephesian Marital Code teaches the subjection of wives or rejects it. His use of the canonical criticism asks: what is in the pericope that made it authoritative for the believing community? The historical-critical method questions whether the Ephesian Marital Code teaches the subjection of wives or rejects it. Guiriba also underlines the contributions of canonical criticism which interrogates the biblical text: what is in the pericope that made it authoritative for the believing community? The canonical method covers the study of the text that is bigger than the scope of the historical-critical method. The focus is not only on what the text meant at the time of its writing but also on the question: Why did the text become canonical? Understanding the canonical process and applying the canonical perspectives and unrecorded hermeneutics to the text in consideration of the present context of the reader contributes to the more nuanced understanding of the theology of marriage of the Ephesian Marital Codes today. Guiriba's findings conclude that an appropriation of Sanders' canonical criticism on the marital code in Ephesians reveals that

the pericope through the use of the verb ὑποτάσσω monotheized and Christo-centrifed the Colossian Household Codes by omitting a direct command for wives to be subject to their husbands, exhorting mutual submission and adding the reverence for Christ in that mutual submission as a condition. This submission is a fruit πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι. The construction of the pericope presents Christ as the model of mutual submission who manifests the unrecorded hermeneutics of God's favor for the weak. The pericope also de-polytheizes the clamor for equality of wives as a response to the religious background of Artemis cultic religion but at the same time, it did not champion the patriarchal culture of the Graeco-Roman society.

The animated discussion which followed each presentation underlined the significance of discerning, interpreting, and responding to biblical texts as it confronts evil and violence as well as their implications in domestic, ecclesial, and planetary spheres.

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