

# A CLASH OF HANDS AND TONGUES – 2 MACCABEES 14 AND 15 IN THE FRAMEWORK OF COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS

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## ABSTRACT

Applying cognitive linguistics to the text of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 is a useful tool for our understanding of these narratives. Studying the author of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15's use of the cognitive concepts 'hands,' 'right hand' and 'tongue' in contrasting ways, makes it possible to reconstruct the narrative into a structure of 'body-cosmology.' In this exegetical structure, the narrative of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 can be described as a confrontation between 'that which is below' and 'that which is above' or a conflict of interests between the authority of the God of the Maccabees and a gentile dictator. In this conflict between a heavenly and earthly force, the Maccabees are depicted as those who restore God's reign by their holy actions.

**Keywords:** 2 Maccabees 14–15, body in religious studies, space

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Cognitive linguistics is an exciting new interdisciplinary development of the past 30 years. As a scientific approach to the study of language, cognitive linguistics endeavours to incorporate different aspects of philosophy, psychology, neuroscience and even computer science.<sup>1</sup> Like other linguists, cognitive linguists also attempt to describe an account for the systematicity, structure and function of language. Cognitive linguistics, as a new approach to the study of languages, differs mainly from other approaches in the assumption that language reflects certain fundamental properties and design features of

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1 V. Evans, B. Bergen and J. Zinken, *The Cognitive Linguistics Reader* (London: Equinox, 2007), xiii.

the human mind.<sup>2</sup> In short, cognitive linguistics is the study of the complex relationship between language and mind.<sup>3</sup> In the past linguists usually divided and studied language according to different aspects such as phonology, semantics, pragmatics, morphology and syntaxes.<sup>4</sup> This is, however, not the main purpose of cognitive linguistics.

Language provides a method of encoding and transmitting complex and subtle ideas. Cognitive linguistics shows that languages have a symbolic and interactive function.<sup>5</sup> Overall, cognitive linguistics shows that languages are imbedded within cultural frameworks and that the symbolic and interactive function of a language are bound to its cultural framework. Thus, the better the understanding of a culture, the more advanced the understanding of its language. It is important to note that in the theory of cognitive linguistics, language is not merely a reflection or representation of reality. According to the theory of cognitive linguistics, reality is constructed by language.<sup>6</sup>

Since the Old Testament and its Apocrypha are the result of the written Word of God, it is important for scholars to realize that cognitive linguistics can improve their understanding of biblical languages<sup>7</sup>. By improving the understanding of biblical languages, the exegesis will also be on a higher level. It is important to remember that just as language is a communication mechanism, texts are mediums of communication.<sup>8</sup> To understand the message of the text, is to understand the author's communication by expressing their ideas through written language. Therefore, the aim of this article is to indicate that a cognitive linguistic approach is indispensable for the understanding of Old Testament texts.

## 2. PROBLEM

During the long history of developing different exegetical approaches to biblical texts, the focus of these different exegetical models range from studying the author, the texts themselves to the first reader or hearer.<sup>9</sup> Recently, considerable attention was given to the development of existential, redactional and canonical exegesis.<sup>10</sup> In this development of

2 V. Evans, and M. Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (London: LEA, 2006), 5.

3 Evans *et al.*, *The Cognitive Linguistics Reader*, xiii.

4 Evans *et al.*, *The Cognitive Linguistics Reader*, 3.

5 Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 6.

6 P.J. Jordaan and S.P. Nolte, 'Susanna: A Story of Dangerous Spaces,' *JSem* 19/2 (2010): 527–529; Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 179.

7 Languages in which the biblical texts were written, namely Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek.

8 U. Becker, *Exegese des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Mohr, 2005), 45.

9 J.H. Hayes and C.R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* (3d ed.; Louisville: Westminster, 2007); G. De Villiers, 'Oor Eksegese en Metodes: Die Reëls van die Spel,' *OTE* 19/3 (2006): 823–830; E. S. Gerstenberger, 'Canon Criticism and the Meaning of Sitz im Leben,' in *Canon, Theology and Old Testament Interpretation* (ed. D.L. Petersen, G.M. Tucker and R.R. Wilson; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 20–31.

10 M.J. Gorman, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers* (Philadelphia: Hendrickson, 2001), 16–20.

exegetical approaches, it was recognized that all biblical texts have their own *Gattung* and *Sitz im Leben* and, therefore, it is necessary to study, not only the *Umwelt* of texts, but also the *Sprachwelt*.<sup>11</sup> In contrast with the attention given to the study of biblical languages and its *Sprachwelt*, not much attention was given to cognitive linguistics as a hermeneutical model in the exegetical proses. That is, exploring the language of the texts as a mechanism used by the author to construct certain realities, even if it may be symbolic realities.

In their studies of texts of the so-called deuterocanonical books or Apocrypha of the Old Testament, mainstream scholars of the past decades approached the Apocrypha in almost the same way as their counterparts with the rest of the Old Testament. In this article the focus will be on a cognitive linguistic approach to 2 Maccabees 14 and 15. However, as a broad overview, the approaches of mainstream scholars to the Old Testament Apocrypha, and specifically to the books of Maccabees, can be summarized as follows:

- Moffat and Kamphausen are examples of scholars whose commentaries merely record the narratives without providing much more than a surface reading.<sup>12</sup> Much is said by them about the different text variations and codices of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15, but they never questioned matters such as the meaning of these stories to certain religious communities and why these stories are recorded and presented the way they are. No attempt is made to indicate a deeper meaning in the narrative or to show the significance of it for the Jewish community;
- Bickermann focuses on the different aspects of God in 2 Maccabees;<sup>13</sup>
- Goldstein focuses on the texts;<sup>14</sup>
- Gruen briefly refers to various motives such as humour and propaganda, but does not proffer a connection to cognitive linguistics;<sup>15</sup>
- Van Henten approaches the texts thematically and he focuses on the Greek influence on the texts;<sup>16</sup>

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11 Hays and Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis*; J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (London: Longman, 1984), 8; H.D. Preuss, *Das Alte Testament in christlicher Predigt* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1984).

12 J. Moffat, '2 Maccabees,' in *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (ed. R.H. Charles; Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 125–154; U. Kamphausen, 'Das Zweite Buch der Makkabeer,' in *Apokryphen und Pseudepigraphen des Alten Testaments* (ed. E. Kautzsch; Tübingen: Mohr, 1921), 81–118.

13 E.J. Bickerman, *Der Gott der Makkabäer: Untersuchungen über Sinn und Ursprung der makkabäischen Erhebung* (Berlin: Schöken, 1937).

14 J.A. Goldstein, *2 Maccabees* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1983).

15 E.S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); *Jews amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

16 J.W. van Henten, *The Maccabean Martyrs as Saviours of the Jewish People: A Study of 2 and 4 Maccabees* (Leiden: Brill, 2004).

- Swartz focuses on the specific dating of texts and the implication the different eras had on the texts. He is of the opinion that the texts also may have been written and used outside Jerusalem. He also states that the texts institutionalize the Hellenization of the Jews;<sup>17</sup>
- Doran refers to the theology and worldview of 2 Maccabees. He even states that the author of 2 Maccabees ‘love to indulge in metaphors and word play’, but fails to make a correlation with cognitive linguistics.<sup>18</sup>

This article will show that a cognitive linguistic approach to 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 will improve our understanding of the texts.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

As an approach to 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 the so-called *body-cosmology* will be used. In using body-cosmology as cognitive frameset, two cognitive concepts will be incorporated, namely the *domain of the human body* and the *domain of space*.<sup>19</sup> In the text the domain of the human body is represented in the author’s use of δεξιά (2 Mac. 14:33; 15:15); χείρας (2 Mac. 14:34); χερσίν (2 Mac. 15:27); χείρα (2 Mac. 15:30); κεφαλή (2 Mac. 15:30) and γλῶσσαν (2 Mac. 15:33). (See Fig. 1).

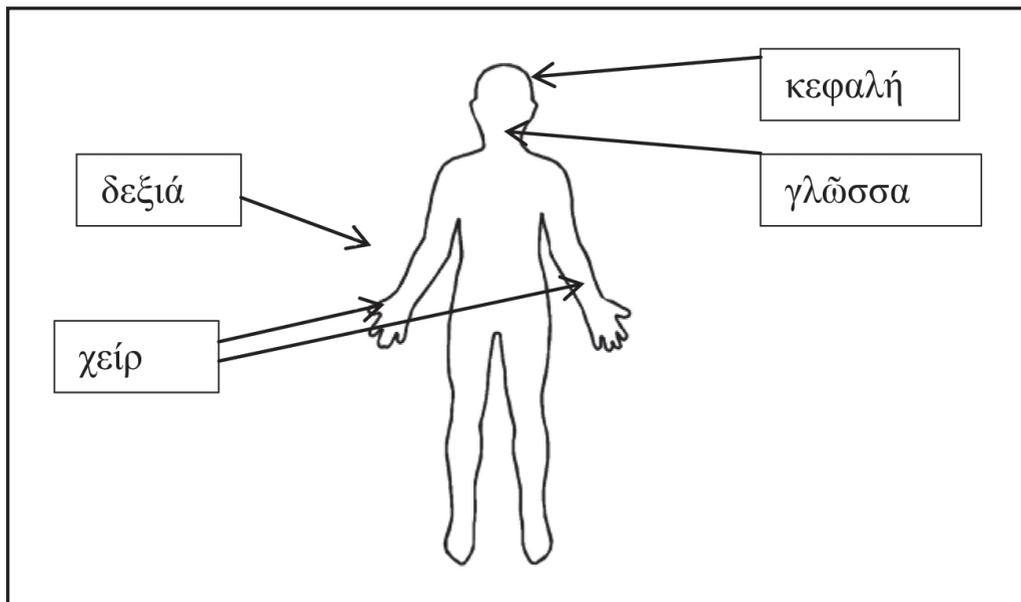


Figure 1

17 D.R. Swartz, *2 Maccabees* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008).

18 R. Doran, ‘1 and 2 Maccabees’ (vol. 4. of *The New Interpreter’s Bible*; ed. M.E. Lawrence; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 181.

19 Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 230–235.

The concept *space*, however, is also represented by the use of the indicated body parts in figure 1, namely ‘right hand’ and ‘hands.’<sup>20</sup> For example, by stretching out his right hand against the temple of the Jewish Deity, Nicanor is symbolically pushing back the authoritarian boundaries (space) of the God of Heaven. At the same time Nicanor is symbolically enlarging his own region (space) of authority. It will be discussed below in more detail. Furthermore, the use of the terms οὐρανός (2 Mac. 15:3) and γῆ (2 Mac. 15:5) also represents the concept of space.

The concepts *heaven* and *earth* not only represent space, but support the idea of cosmology in the text. The references to the temple support both the ideas of *body* and *cosmology*. The temple in Jerusalem was built on the highest peak of Mount Zion and thus the highest point in Jerusalem (Ps. 48). Symbolically, the temple was the ‘head’ of Jerusalem and the Jewish nation. Hence, the notion that you ‘go up’ to the temple or Jerusalem.<sup>21</sup> The temple was divided in three parts in the same way as the body, namely

- the holy of holies – the head;
- the holy part in the middle where the priest may go – the shoulders down to the navel;
- the porch area where the Jews themselves may go – from the navel down.

The temple also represented the cosmology balance that was created by the Deity when he created heaven and earth. The temple was built to represent the heavenly dwelling of the Deity he founded ‘over’ the ‘ordered chaos’ as symbol of his victory over the forces of chaos.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the temple was a symbol of the Deity’s sovereignty over both heaven and earth. The temple also formed the boundary of the Deity’s sacred *heavenly space on earth*.<sup>23</sup> Earthly authorities were supposed to resemble the sovereignty of God and to be subjected to him (cf. Ps. 2). If earthly authorities do not subject themselves to the sovereignty of God, there will be chaos.

From all the above we can derive the following:

- the cosmos forms a body of which the Deity (the God of Heaven) represents the head;
- the temple represents the heavenly cosmos-body;
- the closer you are to the head, the holier you are;
- all things above the navel is good;
- all things from the navel down, is not good;

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20 Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics*, 230–235.

21 Cf. the Songs of Degrees – Ps. 120–134; J.H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Michigan: Baker, 2006), 113–134; F.J. Murphy, *Early Judaism: The Exile to the Time of Jesus* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2002), 36–45.

22 Cf. Ps. 29; Murphy, *Early Judaism*, 68.

23 Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 113–135; Murphy, *Early Judaism*, 36–45

- the earthly authorities represent the sovereignty of God;
- earthly authorities form the head of a earthly body;
- the earthly body represents the heavenly body (See Fig. 2).

As stated above, cognitive linguistics shows that languages have a symbolic and interactive function. The symbolic function of the arm and tongue will be the focus in 2 Maccabees 14 and 15.

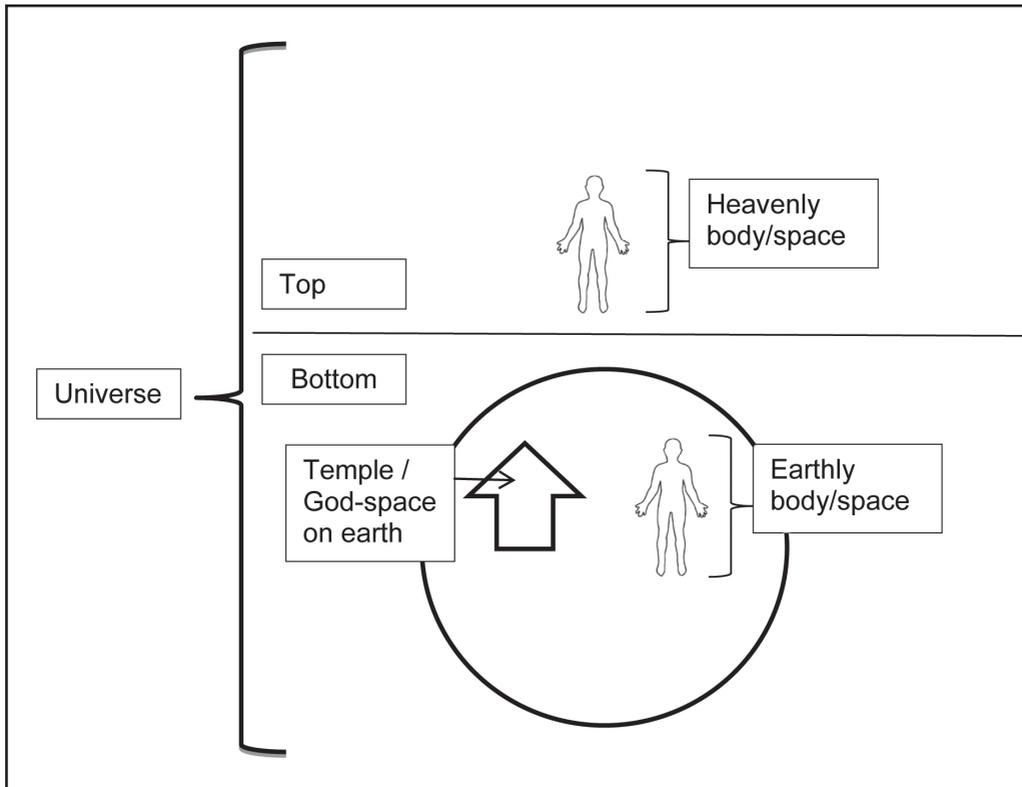


Figure 2: Earth Should Duplicate the Top

## 4. APPLICATION OF THE METHOD

### 4.1 SUMMARY AND GENERAL REMARKS ON 2 MACCABEES 14 AND 15

Second Maccabees 14 and 15 narrate how the Jews in Jerusalem were forced to make war in defense of their religion and temple. The narrative can be summarized as follows:

The Jews heard that Demetrius, the son of Seleucus, has become king (14:1–2). A former high priest, Alcimus, convinces the new king to make war against Judas Maccabee (14:3–11). Demetrius sends Nicanor to Judea to kill Judas (14:12–14). Nicanor goes to Judea, but instead of killing Judas he negotiates for peace. (14:15–22). Nicanor becomes friends with Judas (14:23–25). Nicanor betrays his friendship with Judas (14:26–30). Nicanor lifts his hand against the temple (14:31–36) which leads to the conflict between Nicanor and the Jew Razis (14:37–46).

Nicanor prepares to attack the Jews on the Sabbath (15:1–6). Judas inspires his men by telling them about a dream he had in which the prophet Jeremiah gave him a golden sword with which to vanquish the enemy (15:7–19). Judas prays to God (15:20–25). Judas and Nicanor engage in battle (15:26–28) and Nicanor's head and right arm are cut off and his tongue cut out (15:29–36).

In studying the text it is clear that the narrative reflects a Pharisaic theology.<sup>24</sup> This is supported by the emphases the author places on the importance of the Sabbath (2 Mac. 15:1–6) and the temple-cult (2 Mac. 14:31–33). Overall the narrative could be described as a confrontation between Judaism and Hellenism, but, as it will be presented below, it could also be described as a confrontation between God himself and those who oppose him and his people, the Jews.<sup>25</sup> Like in the rest of 2 Maccabees, the author goes out of his way to show that it was not the Jews who were the aggressors, but that they were just defending themselves against those who are aggressive towards them, their religion and their God.<sup>26</sup> In this regard the following is important to take notice of:

- Demetrius is suborned by the Jews and Judas (2 Mac. 14:1–11);
- Judas is portrayed as a model citizen i.e. liked and befriended by the gentile Nicanor (2 Mac. 14:23–25);
- It is Nicanor who betrays his friendship with Judas (2 Mac. 14:23–25);
- Nicanor threatens to destroy the temple (2 Mac. 14:32–34);
- Nicanor attacks the Jews on the Sabbath (2 Mac. 15:1);

In each instance it is the gentiles who initiate the aggression that leads to war.

## 4.2 A CLASH OF COGNITIVE CONCEPTS

In applying the above method to the text of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15, it becomes clear that the wordplay of the author indicates more than a confrontation between Hellenism and Judaism.

Peace between heaven and earth, i.e., God and people is disturbed. This disturbance is the direct result of an earthly dictator who offends God rather than reflecting the sovereignty of God in his own reign. In terms of body-cosmology, it can also be describe as a conflict of interests between the heavenly and earthly body or 'that which

24 Doran, '1 and 2 Maccabees,' 182; Moffat, '2 Maccabees,' 125–154.

25 Doran, '1 and 2 Maccabees,' 182.

26 Doran, '1 and 2 Maccabees,' 287–288.

is above' and 'that which is below.' Or more so, it is a confrontation between what is sacred and good and what is profane and bad (Fig. 2). When the earthly body does not resemble the heavenly body an attempt must be made to restore the earthly body as a true representative of the heavenly body so that the balance and peace between heaven and earth can be restored.

This interpretation of the text can be based on the way in which the cognitive concepts of *hands*, *right hand*, *head* and *tongue* are used in contrasting ways by the different characters in the narrative. It is from the metaphorical use of these cognitive concepts that the title of this article is derived. Furthermore, in the narrative the heavenly body or God is represented in the concepts of *temple* and *heaven*. As heaven is the dwelling place of God, so is his temple on earth. On earth, the temple in Jerusalem proclaims the government of God. The temple indicates that earth is part of the sphere in space under the authority of God. In the narrative, Nicanor, in his actions and speech, is the embodiment of an earthly power who offends the authority of God by claiming to rule the space under God's authority. The Jews under the leadership of Judas, on the other hand, restore the sovereignty of God on earth by, not only reclaiming God's leadership and authority on earth, but also by invading and proclaiming the leadership of a profane earthly authority.

In the text the *clash of hands and tongues* can be outlined as follow:

- Nicanor stands in front of the temple in Jerusalem, outstretches his *right hand* and *swears* (using his tongue to speak) that if the Jews do not surrender Judas to him, he will destroy God's temple and build a new temple for Dionysius (2 Mac. 14:31–33).
- In reaction to Nicanor's words, the priests at God's temple outstretch their *hands* to God and pray (using their tongues) (2 Mac. 14:34–35).
- Nicanor questions the authority of God to institute the Sabbath on earth by proclaiming himself as a mighty one on earth (2 Mac. 15:1–5).
- After the battle between Judas and Nicanor in 2 Maccabees 15, the Jews *praised* God with *outstretched* hands while Nicanor's *right hand* and his *head* are cut off and his *tongue* cut out (2 Mac. 15:29–35).

From this outlined description it should be obvious that Nicanor used his *head*, *tongue* and *hands* in a negative way while the Maccabees (the faithful) used their *heads*, *tongues* and *hands* in a positive way.

When 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 are compared with other texts from the Old Testament, there is an indication that the *right hand* (δεξιτά) is more than just most people's sword hand or part of their strongest arm. The *right hand* is also a position (space) of authority and power. In Deuteronomy 5:15 God led Israel from Egypt by his mighty hand and strong arm. Psalm 110:1 sketches a picture of the right hand as a place of power, position and authority. This symbol of authority is given to the king to rule on behalf of God.<sup>27</sup> In 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 the *hand* is also a cognitive metaphor for *action*. By

27 H.G.L. Peels, 'Met of zonder kapitaal? Psalm 110 aan beide zijden van de kloof,' in *De spanning tussen bijbelwetenschap en geloofsleer* (ed. G.C. Den Hertog and G.C. van der Kooi; Kampen: Kok,

linking all these meanings of the concept *hand*, it becomes clear that authority is given to governments by the actions of God. In turn the governments must use their power and position (right hand of hands) to represent the government of God (the heavenly body).

The same can be said of the *tongue* (γλῶσσα). In Psalm 137 it is indicated that the *tongue* is an expression or extension of *thought* which has its origin in the brain (*head*). The psalmist states that if he forgets Jerusalem, if his thoughts and actions are not positive towards Jerusalem, then his *tongue* must cleave to his throat and his *right hand* must forget itself. If his tongue and right hand can not be used positively in the service of Jerusalem, then they are useless.

When Nicanor stretches out his right hand against the temple (2 Mac. 14:32–33) during his actions, he claims authority for himself that does not come from God. In stretching out his right hand Nicanor symbolically enlarges his space of authority. At the same time Nicanor pushes back the boundaries of God's government. Nicanor also uses his tongue to utter his thoughts that he will lay waist to the temple. In this, Nicanor's actions are cognitively portrayed as negative.

The priests and Maccabees on the other hand use their tongues and hands positively. They stretch their hands upwards to heaven in dependence of God (2 Mac. 14:34), to get closer to God. Their tongues they use not to curse but to pray to God and to praise him (2 Mac. 15:29, 34). This is in clear contrast to how Nicanor uses his hands and tongue. Rather than depending on God he wants to set up his own authority against God. Rather than to praise God Nicanor curses and questions the authority of God.

The contrast between the Maccabees (Jews) and Nicanor (gentile) can also be described as follows: the Maccabees are holy in their actions. They perform sacred actions in all facilities with their whole body. As part of their sacred actions the Maccabees protect the holy temple and the holy Sabbath. Nicanor on the other hand is profane in his actions for he wants to destroy the temple and attacks the Maccabees on the Sabbath. In their actions the Maccabees are closer to God (that which is above) while Nicanor is further away from God (he belongs to that which is below).

In 2 Maccabees 15:29–36 Nicanor's head and his right arm are cut off while his tongue is cut out. As stated above, the head is the place where human thought has its origin. Nicanor's unholy and blasphemous actions and speech are initiated in his head. He uses his tongue to express his blasphemous words against God while, with his right hand, he enlarges his authority to govern while diminishing God's authority. The amputation of Nicanor's body parts are a way to restore peace and order between heaven and earth. To simply kill Nicanor is not enough. To amputate Nicanor's body parts is a cognitive symbolic action taken by the Maccabees to invade the authority of the unholy and 'that which is set up against God.' By doing this the Maccabees claim that God indeed has power in heaven and on earth, something that Nicanor has questioned. Not

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2007),114; R.J. Tournay, *Seeing and Hearing God with the Psalms: The Prophetic Liturgy of the Second Temple in Jerusalem* (trans. J.E. Crowley; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 200; O. Keel, *Der Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament: Am Beispiel der Psalmen* (Benziger: Neukirchener Verlag, 1977), 240.

only do the Maccabees reclaim the temple-space as part of God's domain, but by cutting off Nicanor's right hand, they also proclaim God's authority over the gentiles. Now a new earthly government or body can be set up in the image of the heavenly body.

From this cognitive analysis of the text, the following questions can be derived to further improve our understanding of the narrative.

- Who uses their hands and tongues in a positive or negative way?
- By using their hands positively, who represents the sphere of the heavenly body more, Nicanor of the Maccabees?

In answering these questions it becomes clear that the Maccabees not only have the right to defend themselves, but they are the true representatives of God and therefore, they have a mandate to overthrow governments or authorities who are against God.

## 5. CONCLUSION

When the texts of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 are approached in a cognitive linguistic way it becomes clear that there is more to the meaning of a text than just a confrontation between Hellenism and Jews, or gentiles and faithful. The narrative of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 is a story of an earthly authority that is supposed to reflect God in its government, but instead it challenges the supreme sovereignty of God. Therefore a change in government is necessary.

The change in government is brought forth by the Maccabees. In all their actions the Maccabees are portrayed as the true representatives of God's authority on earth. As representatives of God's sovereignty, the Maccabees not only have the right to defend the faithful, but to revolt against any secular authorities and even to invade these unholy governments' boundaries of authority and to kill.

The narrative of 2 Maccabees 14 and 15 clearly reflects a strong individualistic Maccabean understanding of God. The author claims that only the Maccabean understanding of God is acceptable. Anyone who differs must be dealt with in the most severe way; even execution of the person is not to be excluded. At the same time the narrative is used to defend the Maccabean way of doing and their understanding of God by portraying God as supporting the Maccabees. Overall it can be stated, as argued throughout this article, that the application of some principles of cognitive linguistics to texts of the Old Testament can expand the understanding thereof. This makes cognitive linguistics necessary in the exegetical process.

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