

A Clash of the Deities in 2 Maccabees 1:10b-17 in Terms of Space, Body and Narrative

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ABSTRACT

The text of 2 Macc 1:10b-17 has been approached in different ways during the past century. Recent developments within linguistic theory were applied to the text. These theories concern, inter alia, space, body and narratives within texts. All of this brought quite different insights for the traditional understanding of the text but for some reason the crucial aspect of space has been largely overlooked. Exploring different spaces in the text helps to highlight the war between the deities in their respective domains. In addition, the investigation of “head” in terms of body theory reveals that a blasphemous head was nearly always decapitated. Lastly, dominant and challenging narratives were constructed showing that Yahweh is depicted as the conqueror with unlimited space.

A PROBLEM STATEMENT

The text of 2 Macc 1:10b-17 presents a narrative, highly charged with conflict, which secondary literature finds difficult to interpret. All scholars acknowledge the fact that this text is the second of a later interpolation but provide different reasons why the text was added. The narrative seems to relate to an episode of a *theomachy*¹ (deity war) with various players involved. In this context, the names of different mythological characters are mentioned both implicitly as well as explicitly.

The first mythological character we encounter is *Navaía* (2 Macc 1:13), a Mesopotamian goddess. According to Doran,² she was also known as Artemis to the Greeks. Further, in 2 Macc 1:16, the name Antiochus (“Epiphanes”) occurs. Although the name Epiphanes does not occur here, we know from 1 Macc 1:10 that this was his second name. The cognomen or epithet, “Epiphanes,” suggests that Antiochus saw himself as the revelation of a god (possibly Zeus). According to Tcherikover,³ coins were found on which the usual image of Zeus resembles Antiochus’ features. There is also a subtle reference to Zeus⁴ in the verb *συνεχεραύνωσαν* (2 Macc 1:16) that reflects the word

¹ Robert Doran, *2 Maccabees* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 6.

² Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 41.

³ Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and The Jews* (New York: Antheneum 1982), 181.

⁴ Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 42.

for thunderbolt (κεραυνός), the weapon of Zeus. The name of "God" is also mentioned in 1:11, 12 and 17. This means that if we take Doran seriously, the names of at least four deities are mentioned who were involved in this conflict. They are Nanaia, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, Zeus, and lastly the God of Israel.⁵

As already stated, scholars find this specific passage difficult to interpret as almost everyone states a different purpose for the inclusion of it:

- Moffat,⁶ following Torrey and Niese, states that the author had it all wrong. According to Moffat, the author is actually mixing the events of the deaths of Antiochus III and Antiochus VII and erroneously applying it to the death of Antiochus IV to lighten up this somewhat barren letter. For Moffat this falsification of evidence makes the letter more interesting.
- Bickerman⁷ says that temple robbing/desecration was often used for the purpose of political propaganda but this one had gone wrong for Antiochus IV Epiphanes. The goddess Nanaia punished him for his sacrilege. The Jewish seer who recorded this narrative wanted to foreground the "criminal arrogance" of Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Bickerman, however, falls short of saying that this passage is an example of turnaround Temple propaganda for the Temple in Jerusalem. In other words, he does draw the implication that it is indeed the Jerusalem Temple and its Deity, and not the temple of Nanaia, that is emphasised here.
- Dommershausen⁸ merely calls this episode an extra-biblical folktale with the purpose of explaining how the same Antiochus IV Epiphanes who raged against the Temple in Jerusalem ultimately met his fate and was punished by Yahweh, the Israelite God. Dommershausen, however, does not explore the *who* of the argument. He does not see that there might have been more than two parties involved, *where* they were involved, and *how* they stood their ground.
- Schwartz⁹ does his usual historical grammatical analysis of this passage. He says that the passage clearly focuses on the wrong temple. Like Moffat, he states that the clumsy constructed narrative is an enrichment

⁵ Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 45, from here on he will be referred to as Yahweh.

⁶ James Moffat, "2 Maccabees," in *Apocrypha* (vol. 1 of *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*; ed. R.H. Charles; Berkeley: The Apocryphal Press 2004), 132.

⁷ Elias Bickerman, *The God of the Maccabees: Studies on the Meaning and Origin of the Maccabean Revolt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1979), 11.

⁸ Werner Dommershausen, *1 Makkabaer, 2 Makkabaer*, (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1985), 110.

⁹ Daniel R. Schwarz, *2 Maccabees* (Berlin, N.Y.: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 133.

of the second interpolated letter, telling a story of the downfall of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, a prominent villain in the book. Schwartz, like Dommershausen above, does not explore the *how*, *who*, and *where* of the narrative.

- Doran¹⁰ states that the narrative is "highly mythological." He is quite elaborate in his rhetorical analysis of the text. For him the purpose of this passage is to narrate the response to a challenge of Yahweh's authority by a gentile ruler. According to him, Yahweh is described here as a fighter-king. The death of Antiochus IV is how Yahweh expels the besiegers of Jerusalem. Doran is detailed in his assessment of this clash between Yahweh and men, and how people are utilised as agents of Yahweh in this regard. Unfortunately, like Moffat, Dommershausen, and Schwartz, Doran also only goes half the way. He does not identify all the parties involved in the conflict, where the conflict took place, and how it was fought. He is the only one, however, to mention a possible mythological conflict: the skirmish between deities.

It is clear from the above that there is little consensus between the cited commentators on the purpose of 2 Macc 1: 10b-17 as interpolated text. Commentaries vary from describing Antiochus IV Epiphanes as having been punished for his defiance of the Temple in Jerusalem to an almost full-scale fight between Yahweh and human kind. Only Doran hints to a possible mythological explanation of the text but does not venture to explore this possibility further.

In my opinion, no commentary goes so far as to see this text as narrating a war among deities because the function of *space* in the text is not examined adequately. This article seeks to correct this *lacuna* by taking space, body, and narrative as heuristic criteria, in order to investigate the possibility of a deity war in 2 Macc 1:10b-17. In this regard, certain preset criteria of narrative, body, and space will be carefully followed. Firstly, a theoretical exploration on narrative, body, and space will be given. Secondly, this approach will be applied to the text. Lastly, the findings will be presented as a new understanding of the chosen text. The criterion of narrative will be investigated in terms of dialectical theory and the last two criteria (body and space) scrutinized according to cognitive linguistics.

B METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

1 Narrative Critique

The importance of analysing 2 Maccabees as narrative can hardly be underestimated. No worthwhile commentary on 2 Maccabees would fail to apply some

¹⁰ Doran, *2 Maccabees*, 44.

narrative critique in some form or another. In this context, George Nickelsburg¹¹ says the following on narratives in this literature:

I am interested not simply or primarily in ideas or motifs or in contents in some amorphous sense, but in literature that has form and direction: in narrative that has plot with beginning, middle and end (or situation, complication, and resolution); in other types of literature that use particular forms and rhetorical devices with consistency and purpose. The critic's task is to find these forms and directions and to interpret the text with reference to them.

Having stressed the importance of narrative critique, I wish to state what approach I use when analysing the narrative in 2 Macc 1:10b-17, namely a dialectical approach. This means that no narrative can be read in isolation. The narrative that was recorded in the text is the echo or mirror of other narratives. It is the deposit of some power struggle within a society. In this way, the two somehow opposing narratives walk hand in hand. The French philosopher Michel Foucault¹² uses concepts like "dominant narrative" and "challenging narrative" to describe this power struggle. Foucault's ideas could open new avenues of understanding the narrative. Foucault¹³ also had a special interest in how the body functions within a narrative. In this power struggle, there are usually docile bodies that should subscribe to the dominant narrative. This makes analysing any narrative quite exciting, especially the text of 2 Macca-bees as the body plays an important role in the story.

In the narrative of 2 Macc 1:10b-17, we find a variety of bodies, namely a king and followers, priests and Temple desecrators, aggressors and victims. Each of these bodies has a different function and role within the narrative. Each body has its own unique space within or against which it functions. Therefore, an alternative way of looking to the narrative and the function of the body is

¹¹ George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature between the Bible and the Mishnah*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 3.

¹² Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Middlesex: Peregrine Books, 1979), 113. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings* (ed. Colin Gordon; trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper; Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1980), 109-133; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (Great Britain: Peregrine Books, 1984), 202.

¹³ Michel Foucault, "The Body of the Condemned," in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought, with Major New Unpublished Material* (ed. Paul Rabinow; trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), 170-178; Michel Foucault, "Docile Bodies," in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought, with Major New Unpublished Material* (ed. Paul Rabinow; trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon; Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1984), 179-187.

suggested. This method has already been tested in various texts in apocryphal/deuterocanonical literature¹⁴ and could be used effectively for the interpretation of this delimited narrative unit.

2 Body in Cognitive Linguistics

Body in narrative, however, must not be confused with body in cognitive linguistics. In both the narrative as well as cognitive linguistics, the body plays an important role, although each has its own domain and each one interprets texts from a different angle. This brings me to my next point on methodology and that is a linguistic one. In this regard, the problem with the commentators is not their knowledge or application of rules and conventions of the Greek language, but the fact that they have not kept up with some of the latest developments in linguistics. Most of the commentaries merely repeat each other on the linguistic level without taking into account new insights concerning interpretations of words and constructions of the Greek text.

There have been huge developments in the field of cognitive linguistics. For example, cognitive linguistic theorists like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson¹⁵ argue that the human body is the centre of knowledge. At an unconscious level, knowledge simply enacts the body. The body does not just understand the world in a certain way; the body is also used to conceptualise:

We can only form concepts through the body. Therefore, every understanding that we can have of the world, ourselves, and others can only be framed in terms of concepts shaped by our bodies.¹⁶

The comprehension of the process of conceptualisation is essential to understanding cognitive linguistics as proposed by Lakoff and Johnson. According to them human beings have the ability to form concepts far beyond the range that any dictionary can put into words. For instance, we have graded concepts characterising degrees along some scale with relative and graded norms of various kinds for, *inter alia*, extreme cases, normal cases and ranges of abnormal cases. Such graded norms are described by what are called linguistic hedges, for example very, pretty, kind of, barely, and so on. Thus it follows that there are more concepts than words. Take as an example the word that will be discussed later in 2 Macc 1:16, namely "head" (κεφαλή): what is

the modern picture that springs to mind when we hear the sound "head"? Is it a human head (physical organ), or maybe the top of a mountain (natural

¹⁴ Pierre J. Jordaan, "Reading Susanna as Therapeutic Narrative," *JSem* 17/1 (2008): 114-128; Pierre J. Jordaan, "Reading Judith as Therapeutic Narrative," in *Septuagint and Reception* (ed. Johann Cook; VTSup 127; Leiden: Brill, 2009), 335-346.

¹⁵ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 555-557.

¹⁶ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 555.

phenomena), or is it the executive manager of a company (corporate leader)? This means that, depending on the context, the meaning of any given word has the potential to increase exponentially, and may well marginalise the value of more traditional dictionaries.

However, determining meaning in cognitive linguistics is not a random, speculative process. The discipline of cognitive linguistics works according to predetermined criteria. Lakoff and Johnson¹⁷ as followed by Kamppinen¹⁸ are quite clear that the body (and for that matter some bodily parts) should be viewed as a container. In the same vein, Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga¹⁹ identify *the human body* as a vessel of the *self*. For example, in this article, the term "head" will be examined by means of cognitive linguistics in order to better reveal why the original author chose this particular noun.

3 A Cognitive Linguistic Perspective of Space

Space will also be analysed in terms of bodily cognition. Just like the body, *space* forms one of the basic domains of human thinking.²⁰ Through our bodily experience we construct structural space through which we then categorise phenomena such as *below*, *on top*, *inside*, *outside*, *under*.²¹ If we climb a mountain it becomes possible to experience the fact that we are *above* that which is *below* us. People whom we find disagreeable are sometimes described as *not close* to us, while on the other hand our friends are deemed as being *close*. We experience our home and categorise it as *private space* and not everyone is welcome to enter this space. Some spaces such as church or temple environments are even experienced and treated as *holy* or *sacred* space. Body and space can also be combined in what can be described as embodied spaces. In this sense for example a deity and his/her spacial domains can be embodied in different forms or entities like a temple, an altar and even a person such as a high priest or king. In this sense Antiochus IV Epiphanes saw himself as an embodiment or "epiphany" of a deity. In this case the human body of Antiochus IV became a vessel or container of a divine entity and divine authority. In the study of 2 Maccabees it becomes clear that for example Jerusalem as the holy city of Yahweh is a sacred space. Because the Jews believed that Yahweh

¹⁷ Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 557

¹⁸ Matti Kamppinen, *Methodological Issues in Religious Studies, with Special Attention to Lari Honko's Theoretical Contribution* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2012), 78.

¹⁹ Samuels M. Low and Ley D. Lawrence-Zúñiga, *The Anthropology of Space and Place: Locating Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 1-37.

²⁰ Martin Haspelmath, *From Space to Time: Temporal Adverbials in the World's Languages* (München: Lincom Europa, 1997), 1.

²¹ Joseph J. de Bruyn, "A Clash of Gods – Conceptualising Space in Daniel 1," *HvTSt* 70/1 (2014): forthcoming; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga, *Anthropology of Space*, 335-342.

resides in Jerusalem, the city is seen as *close* or *near* to God.²² Lee Humpreys²³ even goes as far as to describe Jerusalem as the *axis mundi* between heaven and earth.

Taken from a cognitive linguistic perspective, the Jerusalem Temple is a container of God himself and can be classified as *God space*. Thus, the Temple should be holy and invincible like God. The same applies to the temples of other deities. However, because of defilement by the foreigners (unbelievers) the Temple is sometimes *not near* or *close* to God. Furthermore, in the case of Jerusalem, because the city is conquered by foreign oppressors and prone to their unholy practices, Yahweh cannot reside there anymore. The text shows that mediation is necessary to correct the situation. The type of mediation necessary to bring the believer into proximity with the deity will be discussed when talking about the temple as holy space.

The narrative, body, and space discussed above, will now be applied to the text of 2 Macc 1:10b-17. The sequence will be body, space, and narrative.

C APPLICATION

1 Body: Head in 2 Maccabees 1:16

We read in 2 Macc 1:16 τὰς κεφαλὰς ἀφελόντες (“the heads were cut off”). “Head” (κεφαλή) is the only bodily part mentioned here that needs a cognitive linguistic investigation. None of the consulted commentaries discussed possible meanings for κεφαλή. The notion is then that κεφαλή means “head.” Therefore, the question what type of head is referred to remains to be answered. From the context, it is clear that a certain category of head is employed here.

From a cognitive linguistic perspective, the head can be the container of a person’s (body’s) higher abilities like intelligence and worship.²⁴ In OT texts like Deuteronomium 4:6-10 it is stated that a person’s head must be filled with the “right” belief system. The text describes the space a person’s head as an environment in which the “right” beliefs are inscribed. Consequently, if the head is not filled with intelligence and usefulness but rather with blasphemy against the living God, it is attacking the very essence of the well-being of a family or religious group. This can be derived from the following examples. In such an instance, it is better to cut the head off. This is what happened to Goliath of Gath (1 Sam 17:8, 51). He blasphemed against the living God and his army and thereby threatened the wellbeing of the nation (family). The same

²² Frank L. Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (vol. 3 of *Psalms*; Hermeneia; Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 515.

²³ Lee Humpreys, *Crisis and Story: Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York City: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 61, 64-67.

²⁴ Kamppinen, *Methodological Issues*, 78.

pertains to Nicanor (2 Macc 14:33; 15:30). He also blasphemed against the living God and his army and therefore he also lost his head. The category entitled "blasphemous head" is always cut off. In this regard, also see Jdt 3:13; 5:29; 6:2; 6:4 for examples of Assyrian blasphemy, and Jdt 13:10 for the consequent beheading of Holofernes. Psalm 151:7 also records the severing of a blasphemous head, and the lifting of the shame of the children of Israel. This category is also mentioned in 2 Macc 1:16 where Antiochus IV Epiphanes blasphemed the God of the Israelites and consequently lost his head. Even today, heretics are decapitated in certain cultures. Thus, it would seem that the rightful way of "cleansing" people who attack the wellbeing of a religious group is decapitation.

Such an interpretation of the term "head" is not found in any of the consulted dictionaries, although the category of "blasphemous head" frequently surfaces in Judeo-Christian literature. Thus, even at this stage it can be seen that cognitive linguistics makes a valuable contribution *apropos* the understanding of religious texts in the context of blasphemy where decapitation follows.

2 Space in the Temple of Nanaia and the Temple in Jerusalem

Following now is an application of the theoretical grounding of sacred space discussed under B3.

Scholars do not investigate the temples of Nanaia and Jerusalem in 2 Macc 1:10a -17 in terms of deities and their defiled sacred spaces. Thus, this *leitmotiv* is not explored in any of the consulted commentaries. However, the notion of this article is that 2 Macc 1:10a-17 is primarily a narrative about deities and their sacred spaces.

It seems, however, difficult to make sense of the text as it jumps forward and backward in terms of ideas. Schwartz²⁵ even states that the text is convoluted. He, however, fails to see that vv. 11, 12 and 17 form an *inclusio*. This *inclusio* is identified by the repetition of the idea of praise in these verses. It starts in vv. 11 and 12 with thanksgiving to God as he threw out those who waged war against the Holy city, and ends in v. 17 again with praise to God for deliverance of the impious. Having said this, I will now attempt to show the clash of the deities and their sacred spaces in different episodes.

2a Episode One, Battle One: Deity One (Yahweh) Defends his Space

2 Maccabees 1:11 and 12 state how he (Yahweh) drove out those who assembled in battle against his holy city space: "αὐτὸς γὰρ ἐξέβρασεν τοὺς παραταξαμένους ἐν τῇ ἁγίᾳ πόλει." It is notable that no details are given.

²⁵ Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 133.

2b Episode Two: Deity Two Embarks Upon Space of Deity Three

Verses 13 and 14 immediately start with a new deity, namely Antiochus IV Epiphanes who enters the space of deity three, Nanaia, under the pretense of marrying her and thereby acquiring her money as dowry. This equals a challenge of deity two to deity three as her sacred space is penetrated, and defiled by a person with false pretences.

2c Episode Three: Deity Two is Lured Further into the Space of Deity Three

Verse 15 records how Antiochus IV Epiphanes and a few of his men are getting into bigger trouble as they enter the sacred space of Nanaia further and the doors are suddenly closed behind them. This signals that deity three is taking up the challenge of deity two.

2d Episode Four: Deity Two is Killed by the Priests of Deity Three from Space above in the Way of Deity Four, her Father

In ancient cultures it is often found that deities are killed. Sometimes they are resurrected for example *Tammuz*. Other times they are simply exterminated, for example in the *Additions to Daniel*, *Bel and the Dragon*, *Bel* is killed. This clearly shows that Daniel and his God are stronger than the Babylonian deity. Verse 16 is the climax of this short narrative. It shows how a secret door is opened in the roof and stones thrown from above. Antiochus IV Epiphanes and his men are killed by priests of Nanaia. They are killed in the same manner as Zeus, the father of Nanaia would have done, namely from above. The heads of deity two and his men are cut off same as was done with all those who blasphemed Yahweh.

2e Episode Five: Deity Three and Deity Four Triumph over Deity Two who is Humiliated in Public Space

Verse 16 still continues this narrative. Their heads are thrown into public space, which is related by the Greek word “ἐξῶ.” This is a public exhibition and humiliation of deity two.

2f Episode Six: Deity One’s Space is Extended Infinitely as he Triumphs over Deity Three and Deity Four

Verse 17 is highly surprising and somehow opportunistic. It states, τὰ πάντα εὐλογητὸς ἡμῶν ὁ θεός ὃς παρέδωκεν τοὺς ἀσεβήσαντας (“Blessed be our God [Yahweh] in every way who has delivered the impious”). This is the conclusion phase of the short narrative. Interestingly enough, it is not Zeus that is thanked for the deliverance, but another deity, named Yahweh. Deity one, as in v. 11, is thanked for delivering the impious. He is seen as the strongest of all deities who fights on behalf of his sacred space far beyond the borders thereof. Even

other deities and people are mere pawns in his hands. He sees and controls the greater scheme of things.

3 Narrative Critique

3a The Dominant Narrative

The dominant narrative shows a powerful man named Antiochus IV Epiphanes who, as his name suggests, thought he was a revelation of a god. He went around extending his own space by subjecting men and defiling their deity's sacred spaces. It seemed that even Yahweh and his sacred space, the holy city Jerusalem, had also fallen prey to this self-proclaimed deity. Yahweh seemed unable to defend Jerusalem and influence history. This blasphemer, Antiochus IV Epiphanes, ran rampant without his head being claimed. In the eyes of some people, he and his army were seen to be unstoppable and unconquerable. This unfortunate state of affairs had to be addressed in a creative way that would restore order and dignity of their religion again.

3b The Challenging Narrative

An attempt was made to solve these problems mentioned in the dominant narrative above. This second interpolated letter also poses as authentic. This letter, however, has a different content than the first letter, as it addresses a new problem, namely the question whether Antiochus IV Epiphanes went unpunished for defiling Yahweh's holy space. The author employs all literary means at his disposal to correct this situation, even if it means fabrication. Antiochus IV Epiphanes is demythologised, which means he is shown to be everything but a god. He is depicted as a mere mortal who attempted to defile the holy space of the deity Nanaia in Persia. However, due to his own stupidity he was deceived by the priests of Nanaia. In the narrative, he and his men were stoned from above, the same as what Zeus, the father of Nanaia, would have done, but without Zeus' thunderbolts. Yet the author does not give thanks to Zeus, but to his own God, Yahweh. By giving thanks to Yahweh the author indicates that Yahweh was in control of all of these events. Therefore Yahweh is the owner of all god-spaces. He operates everywhere even through other deities like Nanaia, Zeus and people like the priests of Nanaia. They are all just agents of the Yahweh (cf. Ps. 82:1-2). He ought to be thanked for the deliverance of his people.

D CONCLUSION

It was posed in the beginning of this article that 2 Macc 1:10a-17 should be examined as a mythological narrative of a war between deities. The criteria of narrative, body, and space were used to examine the text. Reading the text through these lenses shows that different deities challenge and clash with one another to defend their different sacred spaces. Ultimately, Yahweh was crowned as the victor and his space was pictured as indefinite. This approach

leads to an interesting and alternative way of reading the text as shown above. It combines some aspects of cognitive linguistics with the idea of Doran that 2 Macc 1:1-10a is highly mythological. None of the mentioned commentators had the same approach.

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