

Why was Chronicles Written in Hebrew?

Language Choice as a Group Identity Marker

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ABSTRACT: Why was the book of Chronicles written entirely in Hebrew in a multilingual Persian-period environment in which Aramaic increasingly functioned as the language of administration and communication? This article argues that conventional explanations are insufficient, as linguistic choice carries broader ideological significance. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory and ethno-symbolic approaches to identity formation, it examines Hebrew in Chronicles as a symbolic cultural resource in Persian-period Yehud. After reviewing the linguistic realities of the period and debates concerning the status of Hebrew and Aramaic, this article analyzes the Chronicler's exclusive use of Hebrew in relation to ethnicity, collective memory, and communal boundary formation. In contrast to Ezra–Nehemiah and Daniel, which incorporate Aramaic sections and explicitly reflect multilingual realities, Chronicles constructs a linguistically unified conceptual world centered on Jerusalem, temple, genealogy, and “All Israel.” The article proposes that Hebrew functions as a form of symbolic space through which the Chronicler reconstructs continuity with Israel's past and articulates a durable sense of peoplehood within the context of Persian imperial rule, thus reinforcing continuity between Israel's textual past and its evolving Second Temple identity.

Keywords: Chronicles, Identity formation, Ethnicity, Postexilic Yehud, Hebrew and Aramaic, language choice

1 Introduction

The question posed in the title—*Why was Chronicles written in Hebrew?*—may initially seem unnecessary, since most biblical texts are composed in that language. However, this assumption becomes less obvious when situated within the linguistic realities of the Persian period. Other late compositions, such as Ezra–Nehemiah and Daniel,¹ incorporate substantial Aramaic sections that reflect the multilingual environment of their time. If Chronicles was indeed composed in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, as is commonly held,² one might expect it to adopt linguistic features that align more closely with contemporary usage. Therefore, its consistent use of Hebrew calls for an explanation.

Several conventional answers are available for this question. Chronicles relies heavily on earlier biblical sources, especially Samuel and Kings, and the decision not to translate them reinforces their authority by reiterating the narrative, law, prophetic speeches, and embedded psalms (Ben Zvi 2011). Hebrew appears to have retained its prestige as the language of sacred tradition and may still have been used, at least in some circles, as a spoken or semi-spoken language (Polak 2006). In addition, concerns about linguistic change, such as those reflected in Nehemiah 13:24, suggest a degree of language consciousness in Yehud (Kottsieper 2007; Southwood 2011; Silverman 2021).

In this study, I propose that these explanations are insufficient. The Chronicler's use of Hebrew may be understood not merely as traditional or practical, but as a meaningful choice within

¹ Ezra–Nehemiah is a complicated document with several redaction phases, probably starting at early fourth century BCE. The Aramaic portion (Ezra 4–6) contain documents whose authenticity is debated, but considered to affirm imperial authority (Grabbe 2004: 70–85; Gertz et al. 2012: 672–676). While the visions in Daniel 7–12 are dated to the Maccabean revolt period, the Aramaic portions (Dan 2–6) are earlier, as Qumran texts already refer to such traditions (Grabbe 2008: 102–107; Gertz et al. 2012: 650–651).

² This is the prevailing opinion on dating of Chronicles. See Peltonen 2001; Knoppers 2004: 101–117.

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a multilingual setting. This will be demonstrated by examining its contrast with Aramaic-inclusive texts, its role as a cultural capital, and its function as a boundary marker. In a context where Aramaic was widely used in administration and communication (Naveh and Greenfield 1984) and linguistic boundaries were increasingly fluid, the selection of Hebrew contributed to a broader process of self-definition. Language is not simply a vehicle of expression but a cultural resource that helps define communal boundaries, maintain continuity with ancestral memories, and structure collective memory (Fishman 1989; Bourdieu 1991).

This question can also be asked of other postexilic Hebrew compositions. Chronicles serves as a case study because its composition in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period coincides with a multilingual environment reflected in works like Ezra–Nehemiah and Daniel (although Daniel reached its final form later; see note1). Therefore, this article does not aim to explain the persistence of Hebrew in all Second Temple literature but rather to examine the ideological and historiographical functions of Hebrew in Chronicles. Moreover, unlike many postexilic compositions, Chronicles shares a chronological horizon with Ezra–Nehemiah, making the contrast between its exclusive Hebrew and Ezra–Nehemiah’s multilingual profile illuminating.

Drawing on sociolinguistic³ and ethno-symbolic approaches,⁴ this study proposes that the use of Hebrew in Chronicles constitutes conceptual boundary-making. More specifically, it suggests that Hebrew operates as a kind of *symbolic space*—a medium through which the Chronicler reconstructs an “Israel” that is territorially, genealogically, and theologically continuous despite the disruptions of exile and imperial domination. In this sense, I propose that

³ For introduction and overview see Trudgill 2000; Wardhaugh and Fuller 2015.

⁴ Particularly following A.D. Smith (2009, for instance).

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linguistic choice is integral to the Chronicler's broader process of shaping a coherent and enduring sense of peoplehood in Persian-period Yehud.

2 Chronicles in Context: Composition and Ideological Agenda

The geopolitical realities of Persian imperial rule define the historical context of Chronicles. The province of Yehud, with Jerusalem at its center, was a small and economically modest region surrounded by rival territories and governed by imperial administrators.⁵ The Davidic monarchy had long since ended, along with the traditional structures of political sovereignty. However, within this context, the Chronicler appears to articulate an identity not grounded in statehood but in memory, liturgy, genealogy, and divine election (Japhet 2009: 13–45).

The book of Chronicles is generally dated to the late Persian or early Hellenistic period, although precise dating remains a matter of debate. Most scholars situate its composition within the literate circles of Yehud, where scribal activity played a central role in preserving and reshaping Israel's traditions. Chronicles presents a sweeping retelling of Israel's past—from Adam to the Cyrus decree—drawing extensively on earlier sources, particularly the books of Samuel and Kings, as well as Pentateuchal traditions. However, this retelling is far from a neutral reproduction of inherited material.⁶

⁵ For archaeological and historical background of Persian-period Yehud see Stern 2001: 366–372; Grabbe 2004: 355–366; Lipschits 2011. For the use of Aramaic script on yhwd seal impressions see Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 62–77. The use of Paleo-Hebrew script on coins indicates some intentional choice (Schniedewind 2006). It should also be noted that the name of the province *yhwd* (or *yhd*) preserved the name of the ancient Kingdom of Judah, unlike the other coins of the region which bore the name of the main city. This may have served, whether knowingly or unknowingly, as a means of preserving national identity (Goodblatt 2006: 140–144).

⁶ For a detailed history of research on the Chronicles, see Kleinig 1994; Duke 2009; Ska 2021. For thematic introductions covering text criticism, the use of ancient sources, multiple editions, the identity of the author and his time, and its place in the biblical canon, see Japhet 1993: 1–49; Knoppers 2004: 37–147. For a review of identity formation approaches in Chronicles, see Jonker 2016b: 25–64.

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The Chronicler's work is understood as an act of historiographical reinterpretation. While adhering to its sources, it reshapes them through omissions, additions, and reconfigurations. Narratives of political conflict and moral failure, especially those associated with the northern kingdom, are minimized or excluded, while emphasis is placed on the Davidic dynasty, the Jerusalem temple, and the Levitical cult. Thus, Chronicles constructs a cohesive, theologically ordered vision of Israel's past, privileging continuity, legitimacy, and cultic centralization successes (see Ben Zvi 2006; 2019). This reshaping of tradition extends beyond content and form. As scholars have noted, the differences between Chronicles and its *Vorlage* are not merely stylistic but ideological, reflecting the concerns and perspectives of the author and his milieu (Japhet 1993: 14–23; Jonker 2016b: 183–185). The Chronicler's historiography thus participates in a project of social memory formation, rearticulating the past to meet present community needs (Ben Zvi 2002).

Within this framework, language must also be considered a part of the Chronicler's constructive activity. Just as the narrative reshapes Israel's history, the linguistic medium participates in framing that narrative. The Chronicler engages with a linguistic tradition by adapting earlier texts while maintaining their recognizable form. This raises the possibility that the choice of Hebrew is not simply an inertial usage of tradition but a component of the work's ideological program.

Therefore, recognizing Chronicles as a carefully constructed historiographical composition is essential for understanding its linguistic features and style. If the text systematically reworks its sources to articulate a particular vision of Israel, then its language—no less than its content—should be examined as a meaningful choice by the author, forming part of the symbolic space

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through which the text articulates communal identity.⁷ However, this approach does not imply that it was widespread throughout the community. Rather, it was probably circulated among the educated *literati* elite engaged with such ideas (Ben Zvi 2019: 1–27). The following section situates this choice within the broader multilingual context of Yehud during the Persian period, where the relationship between Hebrew and Aramaic was complex, fluid, and socially significant.

3 The Linguistic Situation in Persian-Period Yehud

Any attempt to explain the Chronicler's choice of Hebrew must be situated within the broader linguistic realities of Yehud. This environment was not linguistically uniform but was characterized by a high degree of multilingualism shaped by imperial structures, regional diversity, and local traditions. It was characterized by the coexistence of administrative Aramaic, local Hebrew varieties, and complex patterns of bilingualism.

3.1 *Multilingualism and Language Consciousness*

The Achaemenid Empire was multilingual, encompassing many languages and dialects across its territory. In this framework, Aramaic served as the principal language of administration and interregional communication, facilitating governance and economic exchange (Briant 2002: 507–510). Its use is attested in official documents and reflected in biblical texts such as Ezra and Daniel, where Aramaic appears in contexts of imperial authority and correspondence (Chan 2019). Biblical texts reflect multilingualism, code-switching, and the use of loanwords. While Aramaic's role rose in texts, inscriptions, and communication, the public and administrative use of Hebrew declined (Naveh and Greenfield 1984; Schniedewind 2006; Berlejung and Jonker 2026). Hebrew continued

⁷ Lefebvre (1991) laid the theoretical foundation of space as a social product. Spatial trialectics comprise three interrelated dimensions: perceived (physical and material), conceived (mental and ideological), and lived (experiential and symbolic).

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to function as a literary and religious language, particularly in scribal and cultic contexts, whereas local dialects, often grouped under the label Canaanite, likely served everyday speech across the region (Cohen 2020a). The result was a layered, dynamic system rather than a simple hierarchy, with different languages operating in different domains.

Significant linguistic differences exist between the Deuteronomistic text, which uses Early Biblical Hebrew (EBH), and Chronicles, which uses Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH) (Williamson 1977: 37–59; Hurvitz 1997; Japhet 1993: 41–43). The strict classification of Biblical Hebrew into Early/Classic/Standard and Late has been the subject of a vivid debate in recent years, as these categories are unclear and cannot be easily used as a means for dating biblical texts.⁸ Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that Chronicles is a relatively late composition that uses a “less traditional” language, perhaps an outcome of a different scribal school (Rezetko 2007). This study does not depend on adopting either Hurvitz’s diachronic model or the critiques advanced by Rezetko and Young. Regardless of how the linguistic evidence is evaluated, the LBH style of Chronicles and its relatively late date are commonly accepted. Because the argument advanced here concerns the social and symbolic significance of language choice rather than the linguistic dating of biblical texts, this study deliberately remains agnostic regarding this debate.

Aramaic use was rising, but its extent as the vernacular in Yehud remains unclear, whereas Hebrew remained a religious language (Naveh and Greenfield 1984: 119; Polak 2006). Aramaic was a widespread ethno-linguistic element; thus, the once threatening power became a cultural “other” (Levin 2019). Although administrative use and presence in documentary corpora suggest a role in daily life, such evidence does not demonstrate that it replaced Hebrew as the language of

⁸ For review of LBH see Fassberg 2016. Since the exact flavour of Hebrew is not central to this paper, this historical linguistics debate is beyond the scope of this paper. For extensive research review and bibliography, see Hurvitz 2006; Rezetko and Young 2014; 2019; Schniedewind 2019.

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daily communication. Administrative usage may reflect scribal practices rather than those of the broader community. Other evidence, such as increasing Aramaic inscriptions, the decline of Hebrew in everyday writing, and later Hellenistic and Roman developments, points to a gradual expansion of Aramaic in spoken contexts (Dušek 2013; Gzella 2015: 158–211). Simultaneously, indications suggest that Hebrew persisted in some circles, possibly as a spoken or semi-spoken language, alongside Aramaic. The linguistic situation is described not as a complete shift but as a continuum of bilingualism or diglossia, where the roles of Hebrew and Aramaic varied across social groups and in different settings. Yet, the Chronicler adapted the Hebrew flavor of the text but avoided Aramaic.

The use of Aramaic did not erase Judean communal or ethnic self-understanding. Language serves to protect communal cohesion and identity (Fishman 1989: 16–17). Traditionally, religion and shared historical experiences have bound Jews more strongly than language. However, Hebrew has functioned as a vehicle of Jewish cultural and collective self-understanding, not as a political aspiration but as an enduring one (Safran 1999).

In Yehud, language consciousness—awareness of language as a socially and culturally meaningful group marker—was reflected in the perception of Hebrew as a distinct and culturally meaningful medium. There was growing language consciousness during the Persian period in Jerusalem, as reflected in the Hebrew Bible (Chan 2019: 24–26, 291–294). While Aramaic use in Ezra and Daniel was used to assert the authenticity of documents or foreign powers (Arnold 1996), the Chronicler had a different agenda. Whether these passages indicate translation into Aramaic or are simply interpretive explanations remains contested. Nevertheless, they point to a context in which language was not neutral but socially and ideologically charged and intertwined with questions of identity, education, and boundary maintenance.

3.2 *Comparative Perspective: Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah*

A comparison between Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah highlights the distinctiveness of the Chronicler’s linguistic and ideological choices. Although these works emerge from broadly similar historical contexts, they articulate different approaches to communal self-definition, particularly regarding language and markers of inclusion or exclusion.⁹

The multilingual character of Persian-period Yehud appears to have generated a degree of language consciousness, as reflected in several biblical texts. Nehemiah’s concern over the inability of children to speak “the language of Judah” (Neh 13:24) suggests a complex situation, not only of diglossia, but also of local vernaculars used by different social classes (Ben Zvi 2009; Silverman 2021). It has even been suggested that “Ashdodite” was an Aramaic dialect and that Nehemiah was more concerned with the loss of Hebrew than bilingualism (Kottsieper 2007). Moreover, the several vernacular dialects used—Edomite (and Arabic), Judahite, and Phoenician—confirm Nehemiah’s concern about the danger of local assimilation (Cohen 2020b).

Similarly, the account of the public reading of the Torah, in which the text is explained to the audience (Neh 8:7–8), has often been interpreted as evidence of the need to mediate Hebrew for listeners who may not have fully understood it. The term *mēpōrāš* refers to the translation of a document, such as the Aramaic *mēpāraš* (Ezra 4:18), which refers to an official Achaemenid administrative language (Schaper 1999: 15), although the meaning in Nehemia 8 is better understood as “explaining” rather than “translating”, so is hardly a proof for the loss of Hebrew (Silverman 2021).

⁹ Although Chronicles and Ezra–Nehemiah share some linguistic similarities, the traditional view regarding their common authorship has long been abandoned, mainly due to their different ideologies (Japhet 1968; Williamson 1977: 37–59).

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Although the relationship between language and ethnicity is not unequivocal, the author of Nehemiah used this topic and the conflict over mixed marriages to emphasize community solidarity and its boundaries. Here, language becomes an explicit site of tension linked to intermarriage, education, and maintaining group boundaries (Southwood 2011). In contrast, Chronicles remains silent regarding these linguistic conflicts. It neither incorporates Aramaic nor foregrounds it as a concern. Despite its antagonism toward neighboring areas, it operates differently: rather than legislating boundaries or reacting to threats, it constructs an encompassing vision of “All Israel” grounded in shared ancestry, cult, and tradition (Gluska and Lipschits 2024). Therefore, its use of Hebrew is not polemical but constitutive, embedded in the narrative rather than dogmatic.

This contrast suggests two complementary but distinct approaches to identity in the Judahite society. Ezra–Nehemiah represents a model of boundary enforcement in which identity is maintained through differentiation and exclusion, characterized by strong emotions among its members and elevated but limited territorial boundaries. Chronicles, on the other hand, reflects a model of integration, in which identity is reinforced through the reconstruction of a shared past and the recentering of communal symbols, where boundaries are more ambiguous and articulated through elite priestly and aristocratic frameworks.¹⁰

Within this framework, the Chronicler’s use of Hebrew is significant. While Ezra–Nehemiah acknowledges the linguistic plurality of the present, Chronicles brackets it, creating a world aligned with its vision of ancestral persistence and unity. The absence of Aramaic is consistent with the Chronicler’s project: it allows the text to sustain a space in which the

¹⁰ Smith (2009: 53–54) refers to these cases as vertical and lateral ethnicities.

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community is imagined as linguistically and culturally continuous with its past. This comparison underscores that Hebrew in Chronicles is not inherited but is a distinctive choice among options. This reflects a mode of engaging with the challenges of cultural cohesion in a multilingual imperial context, privileging narrative reconstruction and peoplehood over explicit boundary discourses.

This complex linguistic landscape provides the necessary backdrop for understanding the Chronicler's choice of Hebrew. In a setting where multiple languages coexist and their functions are differentiated across domains, the use of Hebrew cannot be taken for granted. Rather, it emerges as a situated choice within a multilingual system that carries potential social and ideological significance. The use of LBH in Chronicles provides not only contemporary adaptation but also a conceptual meaning to previous biblical texts and reshapes their reading (Ben Zvi 2009), while avoiding their translation into another language.

The Chronicler's linguistic preference must therefore be interpreted not simply as a continuation of tradition but as a response—implicit or explicit—to the linguistic conditions of his time. The following section explores how this choice can be understood through the lens of sociolinguistics and theories of ethnicity, with particular attention to the role of language in the construction and maintenance of communal peoplehood.

4 Language, Ethnicity, and Identity: A Theoretical Framework

To assess the significance of the Chronicler's linguistic choice, it is necessary to situate language within broader discussions of ethnicity and social differentiation. Although language does not function as a fixed or exclusive marker of identity, it often plays a significant role in defining group boundaries, structuring social relations, and transmitting cultural memory, particularly in multilingual contexts. Fishman (1989) addressed the interaction between language, ethnicity, and nationalism and identified language as a potential marker of ethnic solidarity and collective

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continuity, while recognizing that linguistic practices may also reflect social, religious, educational, and class distinctions. Language may function as a marker of group solidarity, cultural continuity, and symbolic affiliation, while also reflecting social, religious, educational, and class distinctions. Fishman's distinction between the vernacular and symbolic functions of language is particularly relevant in the Persian period, when Hebrew may have retained ideological and identity-forming significance even as Aramaic expanded in the administrative and communicative domains.

Following the work of Anthony D. Smith, ethnicity may be understood as a form of peoplehood grounded in shared elements such as a common name, myths of origin, historical memories, cultural practices, attachment to a homeland, and a sense of solidarity (Hutchinson and Smith 1996: 6–7). These elements do not require political sovereignty but can persist across changing historical contexts.

Smith's ethno-symbolic approach¹¹ is particularly useful for studying Persian-period Yehud.¹² Language is one of the symbolic resources used to form ethnicity (Smith 2009: 23–26). Although the community elite group did not constitute a nation-state in the modern sense, it cultivated a durable sense of peoplehood through symbols, traditions, and narratives. Texts such as Chronicles participate in this process by rearticulating the past and reinforcing endurance and

¹¹ See Smith 2003; 2009.

¹² The theory of nationalism applied to ancient texts requires caution. Modern nationalism, linked to print, capitalism, industrialization, and nation-states, involves political movements for sovereignty (Anderson 1991; Gellner 1983). However, Smith's approach emphasizes that nationalism's core—myths, memories, symbols, and identities—has pre-modern roots. These ethnic consciousness forms, or “ethno-symbolic nationalism,” exist without modern structures. Modern nationalism and ancient Israelite nationalism share a common ancestry and culture (Goodblatt 2006: 26–27). Linguistic nationalism is usually considered a modern phenomenon, yet it is considered a forceful agent, specifically in minority groups, where language maintenance becomes important (Edwards 1985: 23–75).

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collective meaning, thereby making this approach particularly useful for understanding the Chronicler's linguistic choices.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is not a neutral medium but a symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1991: 43–65). For Bourdieu, linguistic practices are embedded in power and education structures where symbolic capital is acquired and reproduced. Language choice reflects and reinforces social hierarchies and cultural values. In multilingual societies, languages and registers carry distinct social functions and prestige. Sociolinguistics studies language in a social context, addressing language consciousness, bilingualism, diglossia, and dialects. Linguistic consciousness is vital in multilingual settings (Schniedewind 2013: 28). Here, language serves as a boundary marker, distinguishing groups or signaling an affiliation with traditions. Linguistic practices are shaped by education, access to textual traditions, and participation in elite or scribal networks. Thus, producing texts is not only a linguistic act but also a social one, embedded in power relations and cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu 1991: 105–116, 163–170).

The relationship between language and identity is complex and varied. Modern theories of nationalism emphasize the ideal of a one-to-one correspondence between nation and language (see reviews in Safran 1999; Lytra 2016). However, such models are not applicable to antiquity. In Persian-period Yehud, language did not define identity exclusively or deterministically, nor did it imply linguistic uniformity. Nevertheless, language can function as one of several cultural resources through which collective self-understanding is maintained. Alongside genealogy, cult, and territory, linguistic choice contributes to the construction of a shared identity framework. In particular, the use of a traditional or prestigious language may anchor a community in its past, even without political autonomy.

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The establishment of peoplehood preoccupied the authors of biblical texts, and Chronicles is no exception (Smith 2003: 1–40; Wright 2023: xii). The theoretical considerations above suggest that the Chronicler's use of Hebrew should not be treated as a neutral or inherited feature of the text. Rather, it may be understood as part of a broader process of peoplehood construction by an intellectual elite, in which language helps define the community's symbolic spaces.

In a multilingual situation in which different languages carry distinct social meanings, selecting Hebrew can be seen as a meaningful act that engages with issues of authority, continuity, and belonging. The following section explores this possibility in detail, examining how the Chronicler's linguistic choices function within his larger project of shaping identity and memory.

5 Language and Identity Formation in Chronicles

The Chronicler's use of Hebrew should also be viewed within the broader persistence of Hebrew in Second Temple-era Jewish literature. Although Aramaic and later Greek became increasingly prominent in administration and wider communication, several important corpora continued to use Hebrew as the primary literary and cultural medium. Hebrew compositions demonstrate that Hebrew retained substantial symbolic, literary, and religious traditions well beyond the Persian period. The Qumran texts were mostly written in Hebrew (Weitzman 1999). The original texts of Ben Sira and early apocryphal texts such as Jubilees and Tobit were in Hebrew, although they were preserved in Greek (Schniedewind 2013:167), and 1 Maccabees from the Hasmonean period is an obvious identity-formation peak (Grabbe 2020: 79–83). Later Tannaitic traditions seem to revert to Hebrew before a final shift to Aramaic (Schniedewind 2013: 191–197).

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The Elephantine corpus illustrates an alternative linguistic trajectory in which a Judean community used mainly Aramaic rather than preserving Hebrew as its primary written medium.¹³ Although the Yehudite community in Elephantine can be characterized as an ethnic group with some self-awareness, the preservation of Hebrew was not a necessary feature of all Yahwistic communities during the Persian period (Becking 2022). The transition to the Hellenistic period also demonstrates this linguistic challenge, as the Hebrew paleo-script was replaced by the Aramaic script, texts were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek, and the Pentateuch was translated into Greek. In contrast, the Qumran community remained loyal to Hebrew (Schniedewind 2013: 164–190), reflecting similar concerns for cultural continuity. As Weitzman reflected on the usage of Hebrew by the Qumran sect: “Why did the Qumran community write in Hebrew? To transcend the multilingualism of the wayward world around it” (Weitzman 1999: 45).

Chronicles is therefore not exceptional, merely because it was written in Hebrew. Rather, its significance lies in the way Hebrew functions within the text. Unlike Ezra–Nehemiah and Daniel, which explicitly incorporate multilingual realities through Aramaic sections, Chronicles constructs a linguistically unified narrative world centered on “All Israel,” genealogy, the temple, and linkage with the ancestral past. In this sense, the Chronicler’s exclusive use of Hebrew participates in a broader Second Temple phenomenon while simultaneously serving the text’s distinctive historiographical and identity-forming purposes. This cannot be explained solely by the book’s preexilic subject matter, since the Chronicler consistently reshapes inherited traditions in

¹³ The linguistic situation at Elephantine appears more complex than a simple Hebrew–Aramaic dichotomy. While Aramaic served as the principal documentary language, the community operated within a multilingual Egyptian environment and likely interacted with additional linguistic traditions, including Demotic Egyptian (Porten 1968; van der Toorn 2019: 21–41).

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light of postexilic concerns. The language of narration, therefore, remains a choice of the author and his scribal milieu rather than a simple reflection of the period being described.

The use of Hebrew was not confined to Jerusalem-centered Yehud. Hebrew traditions also persisted in other Yahwistic communities, namely, the Samaritans. The significance of Hebrew in Chronicles, therefore, lies not in its exclusive association with Judean identity but in the particular way it is integrated into the Chronicler's program of constructing "All Israel," Jerusalem, and temple-centered peoplehood (Knoppers 2005).

Within the context of Persian-period Yehud, the Chronicler's consistent use of Hebrew emerges as a non-neutral choice. Rather than merely continuing earlier traditions, Hebrew operates as a cultural resource through its integration with genealogy, temple ideology, and the concept of "All Israel." This section explores three dimensions of this approach.

5.1 Hebrew as Cultural Capital

The production of a work such as Chronicles presupposes a scribal milieu in which Hebrew retained its status as a language associated with authoritative ancestral texts (Ben Zvi 2009). In this context, Hebrew functioned as a form of cultural capital, accessible primarily to literate elites trained to interpret and transmit such traditions (Ben Zvi 2011). By composing in Hebrew, the Chronicler situates his work within this sphere of prestige and memory, thereby aligning it with earlier sacred texts.

This alignment is not merely a formality. Chronicles extensively reuses and reshapes earlier Hebrew sources, preserving their linguistic texture while reconfiguring their meanings. The use of Hebrew aligns the rewritten tradition with ancestral texts, presenting the Chronicler's historiography not as an innovation but as a faithful continuation of tradition. This choice implicitly limits the audience to those capable of engaging with Hebrew texts, thereby embedding

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identity formation within a scribal and educational framework. Scribes may have used a language that they no longer used in daily life to sustain the language of old biblical writing (Wright 2023: 167). Educational efforts need not be directed to the broad public but can be circulated within a limited literate class (Bourdieu 1991: 57–63).

In light of the growing role of Aramaic in administration and communication during the Persian period, texts written in Hebrew during this period have gained importance. While Aramaic was primarily the language of administration and the economy at this stage, the continued use of Hebrew may have contributed to the preservation of social and religious continuity and tradition (Schniedewind 2017: 19–28). The Chronicler's linguistic choice becomes particularly significant when viewed alongside other Second Temple compositions that incorporate Aramaic. In Ezra–Nehemiah and Daniel, Aramaic appears in contexts associated with imperial administration, diplomacy, and foreign authority (Arnold 1996). These texts reflect, at least in part, the realities of a multilingual environment in which Aramaic played a prominent role.

In contrast, Chronicles avoids Aramaic altogether, an absence that may reflect a disengagement from imperial linguistic registers. There are a few Old Persian loanwords, indicating some linguistic contact (Wilson-Wright 2015). Rather than reflecting the external world of administration and the empire, Chronicles retains Israel's internal, linguistic tradition. In this sense, the use of Hebrew may be understood as a form of discursive recentering that privileges ancestral and cultic frameworks over imperial ones.

5.2 Hebrew as Boundary Marker

Language also functions in Chronicles as a subtle but significant marker of social and cultural boundaries. Although the text does not explicitly legislate linguistic purity, as in Nehemiah 13, it

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nevertheless participates in a broader discourse in which language is tied to questions of belonging and distinction.

This dynamic can be illuminated by comparing it with other biblical traditions. The parting of the ways between Jacob and Laban is emphasized by an explicit linguistic example (Gen 31:47). The “Other” ethnicity is differentiated by borders and language (Garijo-Serrano 2021). In 2 Kings 18:26–27, the distinction between “the language of Judah” (yəhûdîṯ) and Aramaic is explicitly politicized in the context of an imperial confrontation (Berlejung 2021). Chronicles, however, reshapes this episode (2 Chr 32:18), omitting the bilingual tension and emphasizing the use of “the language of Judah” to address the people. This shift effectively normalizes Hebrew as the community’s language while effacing the presence of alternative linguistic spheres. In this way, the Chronicler uses language as one means of constructing a symbolic boundary.

One of the most distinctive features of Chronicles is its extensive use of genealogies and sweeping historical scope, extending from Adam to the postexilic period. Chronicles presents ethnic and communal trends, including a desire to depict the people of Israel in their land with an extremely expansive view of borders (Japhet 2009: 279–280). These elements anchor the community in an enduring narrative of origin, descent, and divine interaction.

The struggle was not only with the surrounding territories and imperial habits but also with the internal tendencies of society (Jonker 2016b: 71–114). While the notion of language as central to Jewish self-understanding is debated, the choice of language in these texts remains significant as an ideological social marker (Schwartz 1995). While Schniedewind (2006) characterized the Jewish people living in Persian Yehud as losing their historical language in favor of Aramaic, he acknowledges its preservation as a “liturgical language, a sacred tongue, and an icon of political legitimacy and national identity.”

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Linguistic continuity is integral to this process. As the language of earlier traditions, it enabled the Chronicler to reactivate and reframe inherited narratives, creating a sense of temporal persistence that bridged the rupture of exile. Through cultural transmission, the past is not merely recalled but made present, allowing the community to locate itself within an unbroken historical trajectory. In this sense, Hebrew functions as a medium of cultural memory, sustaining the link between the past and the present and reinforcing the legitimacy of the community's claims to its identity and heritage.

5.3 Hebrew as Symbolic Space

Beyond its communicative and cultural functions, Hebrew in Chronicles may constitute a form of symbolic space. Just as the text constructs geographical and cultic spaces—most notably Jerusalem and the Temple—it also creates a linguistic domain that enables the text's intended audience to situate itself in a similar manner.

The argument advanced here does not assume that language automatically functions as a marker of ethnicity. Rather, the significance of Hebrew in Chronicles emerges from its interaction with other identity-forming features of the text: the genealogies (1 Chr 1–9) map belonging through lineage,¹⁴ the repeated emphasis on “All Israel,”¹⁵ the centrality of Jerusalem and the temple,¹⁶ and the reconstruction of a continuous national past—all of which operate within a single Hebrew narrative framework. Therefore, language acquires significance not in isolation but through its integration with the Chronicler's broader project of constructing communal memory and peoplehood.

¹⁴ See detailed discussions, among others: Oeming 1990; Sparks 2008.

¹⁵ On this concept in Chronicles see Williamson 1977: 87–1131; Japhet 2009: 209–241; Jonker 2016b: 154–157.

¹⁶ See Willi 1994; Kartveit 2016.

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Within this framework, Hebrew operates as a boundary and container of identity, delineating who belongs to the literary-constructed world and who remains outside it. It provides a medium through which the Chronicler can reconstruct an “Israel” that transcends the political and linguistic fragmentation of the Persian period. In this sense, language is integral to the Chronicler’s project, not external to it, as it provides the medium through which communal belonging is imagined and preserved.

Taken together, these dimensions suggest that the Chronicler’s use of Hebrew is best understood as a multifaceted identity-forming function that serves multiple purposes. It simultaneously aligns the text with previous texts, differentiates it from imperial linguistic practices, creates markers of distinction, and sustains historical continuity (Ben Zvi 2009). The significance of Hebrew does not derive from language alone but from the fact that these identity-forming themes are consistently articulated through a single linguistic medium, despite the multilingual environment in which the work was composed. Most importantly, it contributes to creating a framework in which identity can be articulated and maintained. In a multilingual imperial context, where linguistic practices were fluid and layered, the choice of Hebrew may have contributed to stabilizing meaning and anchoring the community in a shared cultural and textual world.

6 Imperial Context and Negotiation of Peoplehood

The Chronicler’s linguistic choices must be understood within the broader framework of Persian imperial rule. Yehud was not an isolated cultural unit but a small province embedded within a vast, administratively developed empire. This imperial context shaped not only political and economic life but also the conditions under which identities were articulated and maintained in the region’s societies.

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6.1 Multilingual Empire and Negotiation of Communal Belonging

The Achaemenid Empire fostered a high degree of cultural and linguistic interactions (Briant 2002: 507–511). The empire’s multilingualism is attested in the Bible as well (Esth 1:22). Imperial governance relied on administrative standardization, most notably using Aramaic, while simultaneously allowing local traditions and institutions to persist. This combination of integration and accommodation created a setting in which local communities were continuously exposed to external influences without being fully absorbed into a uniform imperial culture.

Such conditions often generate zones of cultural negotiation in which communities navigate between adaptation and differentiation. In Yehud, this process is reflected in the coexistence of multiple linguistic, cultural, and social frameworks, as well as in the diverse strategies adopted by different groups in response to imperial realities. After the kingdom’s downfall, language may have been a scribal tool for communal differentiation under imperial conditions (Wright 2023: 166). Language maintenance is an important aspect through which elites face ethnic challenges (Fishman 1989: 202–223).

The dynamics of identity formation in this context may be illuminated through models of cultural interaction that emphasize the tension between assimilation and resistance, or, more broadly, between integration and boundary maintenance (Bhabha 1994: 85–92; Sam and Berry 2016: 19–22). Communities under imperial rule often adopt elements of the dominant culture while simultaneously seeking to preserve or redefine their distinctiveness. Hebrew likely functioned within more limited social domains, and the Chronicler positioned it as being culturally central. The continued production of Hebrew literary works may be understood as reinforcing communal continuity and distinction, and “has become vital to Jewish identity and survival” (Aberbach 1998: 3).

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The identification of a language with a people may function as a tool of ethnic resilience under imperial rule or fluid borders (Schniedewind 2013: 92–96). In Persian-period Yehud, these dynamics are visible across textual and social phenomena, including the administrative adoption of Aramaic, the use of Hebrew in literary and cultic settings, and debates over intermarriage, genealogy, and differentiating features. These developments suggest that identity is negotiated rather than static amid changing conditions. Chronicles participates in this cultural recentering process. Rather than opposing imperial structures, the Chronicler redirects attention to internal authority: the Davidic dynasty, the Jerusalem temple, and the persistence of “All Israel” (Boda 2013).

This reorientation is achieved by reshaping history, elevating cultic institutions, and consistently using the Hebrew language. By avoiding Aramaic, the Chronicler refrains from engaging with the empire’s administrative language and instead situates his work within an Israelite textual tradition. This is not overt resistance but a selective disengagement from imperial linguistic frameworks, allowing for the construction of an alternative identity-shaping order grounded in ancestral memory and religious practices. “Bracketing out” the empire is attested elsewhere in Chronicles as well (Ben Zvi 2021).

Yehud occupied a marginal peripheral position within the Persian Empire while simultaneously functioning as a local center of religious and cultural activity. This dual positioning may explain the Chronicler’s emphasis on internal cohesion and cult centrality in the temple. By foregrounding Jerusalem and its institutions, the text redefines the locus of significance, shifting it from the imperial centers of power to Israel’s sacred geography, thereby turning marginality into centrality (Jonker 2016a).

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The use of Hebrew is consistent with this reorientation. As a language associated with tradition, scripture, and cult, it anchors the community in a cultural center independent of imperial administration. Thus, linguistic choice contributes to the reconfiguration of spatial and cultural hierarchies, aligning with the Chronicler's broader project of communal self-definition.

6.2 *Identity without Sovereignty*

The absence of political independence during the Persian period did not preclude the development of a strong identity. On the contrary, the lack of a sovereign state appears to have intensified the importance of non-political markers of peoplehood, such as genealogy, law, cult, and language. As scholars have noted, the delimitation of land, organization of memory, and articulation of communal boundaries often take on heightened significance in such contexts (Goodblatt 2006: 116–117; Granerød 2021: 6).

The Chronicler's project may also be understood within a broader reflection on the role of biblical literature in sustaining collective self-understanding after the loss of political structures. Much of the biblical historiography has emerged as an attempt to imagine forms of communal continuity that can endure beyond the rise and fall of kingdoms (Wright 2023: 313–314, 466–467). The formation and preservation of such texts allowed identity to be maintained across generations and through volatile political realities. Heinrich Heine's much later reflection of the Bible as a "portable fatherland" (Heine 1887: 310) captures, in retrospective terms, this dynamic: a mode of belonging rooted not in territory or sovereignty but in shared narrative, memory, and practice. The Chronicler's work exemplifies this process by relocating the foundations from political to sacred and cultic institutions. Maintaining the language became a critical choice for making this textual fatherland adhere to the Chronicler's vision of Israelite peoplehood.

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Chronicles contributes to this process by constructing a vision of Israel that is territorially expansive, historically persistent, and theologically coherent, even in the absence of political autonomy. Language plays a crucial role in this regard. Hebrew provides a medium through which the Chronicler and his intended audience can imagine themselves as being rooted in a shared past and oriented toward a common future, independent of imperial structures.

In summary, the Chronicler's use of Hebrew can be understood as part of a broader process of negotiating peoplehood within an imperial context. This reflects neither isolation from nor full assimilation into the surrounding culture, but rather a selective and purposeful engagement with Persian rule. By situating his work within the Hebrew textual tradition, the Chronicler participates in creating a linguistic domain that promotes identity in the absence of political sovereignty. In this sense, language is a key instrument in the ongoing process of defining and maintaining peoplehood in Persian-period Yehud.

7 Conclusion

While the persistence of Hebrew characterizes Second Temple Jewish literature, Chronicles provides an illuminating case for examining the relationship between language choice, historiography, and identity formation. The reasons why Chronicles was written in Hebrew cannot be answered solely by appealing to tradition, source dependence, or linguistic practices. Although these factors played a role, they do not fully account for the consistency and exclusivity of Hebrew use in a multilingual Persian-period environment. Indeed, direct evidence of the Chronicler's intent is not available, and our conclusions are drawn from textual analysis within a reconstructed sociolinguistic context. Any reconstruction of the linguistic situation in Persian-period Yehud remains tentative because of limited available evidence. Within its historical and sociolinguistic context, the Chronicler's linguistic choice emerges as socially and ideologically significant.

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Chronicles is not unique in its use of Hebrew, as Hebrew appears in most biblical texts. Yet, despite its late dating, the persistence of Hebrew is noteworthy. Hebrew in Chronicles should be understood as part of identity formation in the ancient world. Language does not automatically function as a marker of ethnicity, and the Chronicler's message has not reached the masses. However, in a setting of linguistic plurality and shifting cultural dynamics, language functions as a medium of communication and a resource for articulating and maintaining peoplehood. Drawing on sociolinguistic and ethno-symbolic perspectives, this study shows that Hebrew operates in Chronicles as cultural capital, a boundary marker, and a medium of historical persistence.

Most importantly, Hebrew constitutes a form of symbolic space in the Chronicler's work. Just as the text reconstructs geographical, genealogical, and cultic frameworks that define "All Israel," it establishes a linguistic domain that enables the intended audience to situate itself in a continuous and meaningful past. The reception of this approach during the time Chronicles was written is uncertain, but it seems to have aimed at setting a standard.

The comparison with Ezra–Nehemiah further highlights the distinctiveness of this approach. While these texts explicitly engage with linguistic plurality and boundary enforcement, Chronicles adopts a more integrative approach, embedding its linguistic choices within a comprehensive narrative of unity and endurance. Thus, the absence of Aramaic is not merely incidental but is constitutive of the textual world.

In the absence of political sovereignty, communities such as those in Persian-period Yehud relied on alternative mechanisms to define and preserve their sense of identity. Chronicles demonstrates how language, alongside memory, cult, and genealogy, can serve this function. By maintaining Hebrew as its exclusive medium, the text participates in constructing a durable cultural framework that transcends the immediate realities of imperial rule.

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Therefore, the Chronicler's Hebrew is not simply a legacy of the past but an instrument for shaping the future, thereby linking ancestral textual traditions with later forms of Jewish cultural self-understanding. It transforms language into a site of belonging, a boundary of identity, and a space in which the community of Israel can be continually reimagined. Thus, the Hebrew language is an integral part of the author's "All Israel" perception.

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AI tools were used for language proofing and style improvement. The ideas presented are the author's own.

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