

Unicity of God and idolatry: is it still a problem for the Chronicler?

Stefano Vuaran

Faculty of Theology of Triveneto, Pordenone, Italy

svuaran@gmail.com  <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7725-9702>

The question of idolatry occupies a central place in the Deuteronomistic History. Seeking to provide a theological explanation for the exile, the author finds the reason for that tragedy in the history of Israel and Judah: the national God YHWH and the people had made a covenant of alliance and mutual fidelity, but the latter violated it by turning to foreign deities. YHWH's justice can only be expressed through the manifestation of his faithfulness: since exile had been threatened from the outset as a consequence of breaking the covenant (Deut. 29:27), it must necessarily come to pass, and so it does. Japhet aptly defines idolatry as “the narrative's unifying theme” in the Books of Kings (Japhet, 1989, p. 215).

The Chronicler (understood as a collective author rather than an individual figure) writes in a later period, presumably between the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the fourth century BCE, and is motivated by other ideological and theological interests. The exile has already been explained and accepted in the consciousness of the people of Israel. New problems and challenges now arise for the people living in the province of Yehud: redefining their collective identity not on the basis of their own kingdom, led by a sovereign and a dynasty that would guarantee its future (a hope that perhaps the Dtr still nurtured, if we consider the conclusion of 2 K 25:27–30), but rather around the temple in Jerusalem, its worship and its personnel, namely priests and Levites, who had gradually assumed leadership of the nation. Whereas the Dtr sought to defend service to YHWH as the only legitimate religious practice for Israel in order to prevent further

infidelity and consequent punishment, the Chronicler seeks to centre the life of God's chosen people around the place chosen by God in the city chosen by God.

The question that prompts this contribution is whether the theme of idolatry remains important to the Chronicler, who inherits the texts of Samuel and Kings from tradition. What remains of the centrality it had for the Dtr, and how does the second historian use his *Vorlage* to communicate his own message? Let us examine selected episodes in the history of the divided monarchy that are particularly relevant to the theme: the schism of Jeroboam, the reigns of the ungodly kings Ahaz and Manasseh, and, connected with the latter, the exile to Babylon. We will compare the texts of Kings and Chronicles by placing them within their broader context, so as to identify the key elements of the two authors' messages. It will become apparent that the differences that emerge are also linked to the theme of idolatry and to the different perspectives from which they address it.

1. The schism of Jeroboam

Although the Chronicler draws on his source almost verbatim, the framework within which he places the narrative of the separation between the northern and southern kingdoms and the subsequent religious schism is significantly modified, with the result that the episode takes on a different meaning.

1 Kings 12		2 Chronicles 10–11	
Context: Solomon the idolater (ch. 11)		Context: Solomon's integrity (chs. 1–9)	
12:1–19	Break between Rehoboam and the north	10:1–19	Break between Rehoboam and the north
12:20–25	Political schism	11:1–4	Political schism
12:26–33	Religious schism	11:5–12	Rehoboam's fortifications in Judah
		11:13–17	Consequences of the religious schism

In Chronicles, the religious schism is not narrated in this context: it is briefly recounted retrospectively in a speech given by Rehoboam's successor, Abijah, during a military confrontation between the two kingdoms (13:8–9). In the account of Rehoboam's reign, however, only the assembly at Shechem is mentioned, with the consequent separation of the northern tribes, without any mention of the establishment of the sanctuaries of Dan and Bethel; the schism itself remains implicit, and only its consequences for the people are described.

1.1. God's will regarding the political schism

In both 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles, the character of Shemaiah, “a man of God,” is entrusted with the task of providing a theological interpretation of the division between the two kingdoms: Rehoboam is called upon to renounce a fratricidal war to reconquer the rebellious north because “this matter came from me,” an expression found in both 1 K 12:24 and 2 Chr 11:4 (כִּי מֵאֵתִי נִהְיָה הַדְּבָר הַזֶּה). Both collections take care to distinguish between political and religious schism: the former corresponds to the will of YHWH, while the latter is subsequently introduced as an act of impiety. However, despite the identical wording of 1 K 12:24 and 2 Chr 11:4, the reason why YHWH sanctions the division of Rehoboam's kingdom is different. The reason for this difference lies in the context of the episode, particularly in the differing characterizations of Solomon.

In the Dtr's narrative, the first king guilty of introducing idolatry into the country is Solomon, led to it by his numerous foreign wives, whom he married to establish alliances with other kingdoms (1 K 11:1–8); this leads to his rejection by YHWH, who announces that Solomon's dominion will be divided after his death (11:9–13). After punishing the king by raising up enemies who weaken his power (11:14–25), God promises Jeroboam power over the northern tribes through the prophet Ahijah (11:26–40). The division of the kingdom, therefore, is reinterpreted as a consequence of Solomon's unfaithfulness to the one God of the nation, compounded by the misrule of which Jeroboam is a victim and against which he rebels.

All this is missing from Chronicles, where Solomon actually surpasses David himself in integrity, so much so that his reign is flawless

(2 Chr 1–9); his misrule is glossed over, so that Jeroboam's rebellion begins after the king's death, making it politically unjustified: although there is mention of his flight to Egypt "for fear of King Solomon," the cause and context of this fear are not specified (10:2). The division of the kingdom takes place as the fulfilment of Ahijah's oracle (10:15), the text of which, however, is not reported: since Solomon's idolatry is not mentioned, the allusion to Ahijah's prophecy also takes on a different connotation, no longer appearing to be the announcement of a just punishment. Deprived of its connection with both the idolatry and the misrule of David's son, the political schism remains without a clear explanation from either a human or a divine point of view: it does not appear to be a consequence of either misrule or transgressions against God committed by the king. It is attributed solely to the will of God, who is the true ruler of the people and who grants kingship to whomever he wishes with the utmost freedom.

1.2. Rehoboam's positive portrayal and Jeroboam's impiety

In addition to the presentation of Solomon's integrity, the Chronicler also diverges from his *Vorlage* in his interpretation of the figure of Rehoboam. In the Dtr narrative, while Solomon bears the greater responsibility for the division of the tribes because of his idolatry and misrule, Rehoboam also shares in both of these faults: in the assembly at Shechem (1 K 12:1–19), he is presented as an unwise and excessively harsh man, while in the summary of his reign, expressed through the conventional formula used for sovereigns (14:21–24), the people appear to have been abandoned to uncontrolled idolatry without being corrected.

In Chronicles, the inclusion of the passage in a new narrative plot causes some substantial changes in the meaning attributed to the episode of the assembly at Shechem (2 Chr 10). As discussed above, the Chronicler takes the divine origin of the political schism to extremes because, in the absence of human motivation, it is explained solely as part of YHWH's plan. Therefore, the assembly at Shechem itself appears to be politically unmotivated. Rehoboam is absolved of all responsibility and spared negative judgement: in 2 Chr 11:17, it is explicitly stated that the

early years of his reign were marked by righteousness in the footsteps of David and Solomon. Consequently, the confrontation between the young and the old in Rehoboam's court is devoid of the negative connotations that emerge in 1 K, serving instead as a straightforward account of the events that led to the division of the kingdom and fulfilled God's will.

The Chronicler also addresses the question of Rehoboam's responsibility in a later passage, in the speech that his son and successor, Abijah, delivers during a war between Judah and Israel (2 Chr 13:4–12), which also recounts the story of the religious schism in retrospect. Recalling the assembly at Shechem and the political schism, Abijah describes his father as *נָעַר יְרֵד־לָכֶבֶד* (13:7). These are the same terms used by David to describe his son Solomon in 1 Chr 22:5 and 29:1, but with an important difference: Solomon was actually very young, while Rehoboam ascended the throne at the age of forty-one (2 Chr 12:13); therefore, it would be appropriate to translate *נָעַר* not as an indication of age, but rather as a qualitative description of the new king's personality, i.e., "immature." In Solomon's case, the adjectives used by his father reflect a straightforward observation about his age; in Rehoboam's case, they are attributed to him by his son Abijah as a qualitative judgement of his character. Abijah does not completely exonerate Rehoboam, but presents him as a victim of people stronger and more resolute than himself, and consequently places the greater responsibility for the political schism on Jeroboam, who, supported by his followers, took advantage of him.¹

This solution, intended to absolve the Davidic dynasty of the sins of the northern kingdom, creates a tension with what was stated earlier: Abijah's polemical speech, completely ignoring any reference to Ahijah's prophecy and Shemaiah's oracle, ends up presenting the political schism as a human abuse of power, contrary to YHWH's will to establish David and his descendants as rulers of all Israel (2 Chr 13:5). To resolve the contradiction, some scholars have invoked the theological principle of "double causality," according to which the fulfilment of

¹ According to Knoppers, the presentation of Rehoboam's weakness is not an expression of the Chronicler's negative judgement, but reflects his favourable attitude towards Rehoboam: "sympathetic reading of Rehoboam's role" (Knoppers, 1990, p. 439).

YHWH's will can coexist with full human responsibility without denying it; the event would therefore be both preordained by God and caused by the wickedness of Jeroboam and the other officials (Seeligmann, 1963, pp. 385–411; Amit, 1987, pp. 385–400; Amar, 2017, pp. 22–23). Other commentators have simply noted the existence of a tension, accepting it and refraining from further explanation (e.g., Japhet, 1993, pp. 691–692; Klein, 2012, pp. 200–201).

I prefer to consider the mention of political schism in close relation to the overall context in which the passage appears, focusing in particular on two elements. Firstly, the rest of Abijah's speech is fundamentally centred on the religious schism, the subject of verses 8–12: verses 6–7 should be considered an introduction that emphasizes the faults of Jeroboam and the northern Israelites, in which the use of a polemical tone is well suited to the heated confrontation between the two rulers. Secondly, we must bear in mind that the author's theological position had already been expressed in Shemaiah's first prophecy, in which the political schism was explicitly presented as arising from the will of God (2 Chr 11:4), in opposition to Rehoboam's desire to reconquer the north (2 Chr 11:1). The argument put forward by Abijah, who also intended to wage a war of reconquest, repeats Rehoboam's position, which Shemaiah had rejected, rather than expressing the Chronicler's view. Therefore, it does not present the correct theological interpretation of events, even though Abijah was a righteous king. The fact that, at the end of the battle, despite Judah's victory, only a few cities were conquered, rather than the entire north (2 Chr 13:19), can be considered a confirmation of divine will. Consequently, I believe that vv. 6–7 do not reflect the Chronicler's theological vision,² but serve only as a polemical argument placed in Abijah's mouth to reinforce the accusations concerning Jeroboam's ungodly behaviour in the religious sphere.

² Frisch reaches the same conclusion from a different starting point, namely the comparison between the texts of 1 K and 2 Chr referring to Jeroboam (Frisch, 2000, p. 28). Generally, however, commentators take Abijah's speech as an expression of the Chronicler's theological view of the northern kingdom, leaving the resulting contradiction unresolved (e.g. Japhet, 1989, pp. 404–405).

1.3. “All the tribes of Israel” are faithful

As mentioned above, in the context of Rehoboam’s reign, the Chronicler does not narrate the religious schism, but describes the consequences it had for the people of Israel.

^{12b} So he [Rehoboam] held Judah and Benjamin. ¹³ The priests and the Levites who were in all Israel presented themselves to him from all their territories. ¹⁴ The Levites had left their pasturelands and possessions and had come to Judah and Jerusalem because Jeroboam and his sons had prevented them from serving as priests of the Lord ¹⁵ and had appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat-demons and for the calves that he had made. ¹⁶ Those who had set their hearts to seek the Lord God of Israel came after them from all the tribes of Israel to Jerusalem to sacrifice to the Lord, the God of their ancestors. ¹⁷ They strengthened the kingdom of Judah, and for three years they made Rehoboam son of Solomon secure, for they walked for three years in the way of David and Solomon (2 Chr 11:12b–17).

After presenting Rehoboam’s military power, with the construction of fortifications throughout the country (11:5–12a), the Chronicler goes on to describe the composition of the population (11:12b–17) and finally some provisions concerning the court and the royal family (11:18–23). In this context, Jeroboam’s religious schism is mentioned, presenting it as now consummated and fully operational. Since there is no trace of idolatry among the previous Davidic kings, this is the first contamination of the people of YHWH with cults of spurious origin. The Chronicler first states that all Judah and all Benjamin are on Rehoboam’s side. Secondly, the priests and Levites of the north left their lands to settle in the south, so that the entire tribe of Levi also gathered there. An interesting fact, absent in the Dtr, is the voluntary migration of members of all the other northern tribes in order to preserve their loyalty to the national God. Later in the work, changes in the border between the two kingdoms will lead to further changes in the composition of the population, from the perspective of Israel as a whole, composed of all the tribes (Vuaran, 2024, pp. 539–548). Therefore, it is incorrect to say that in the Book of Chronicles the population faithful to YHWH

includes only the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi, since from the beginning the southern kingdom was inhabited by members of all the tribes of the Jewish people: three in their entirety, the others only in part. The Chronicler's attention is certainly focused on the kingdom of Judah, which encompasses not only the tribe of the same name, but all faithful Israel, composed of all its tribes.

The members of the northern tribes who migrate south in flight from idolatry become a model for Israelites who are willing to follow the Lord to Jerusalem, maintaining the unity of the people. Those who follow Jeroboam, on the other hand, represent the opposite example of those who, by adhering to alternative religious practices, exclude themselves from a proper relationship with YHWH, deprive themselves of his presence and consequently lose his assistance. The rest of the Chronicler's work will disregard the latter and recount the events of the kingdom of Judah alone, where the Israelites faithful to God dwell; as we shall see, however, the north will not be completely abandoned by God.

1.4. The relativization of the religious schism

In conclusion, the Chronicler considers the political schism to be part of God's plan, and Solomon and Rehoboam bear no responsibility for it that would cast them in a negative light. On the contrary, Jeroboam, who initially carried out God's will with this separation, then imposed a religious schism to which some members of the northern tribes adhered, placing themselves outside the will and benevolence of YHWH. However, the absence of a direct account of the religious schism, which is presented only in a retrospective speech delivered by Rehoboam's successor, reduces its significance. The theme of idolatry is thus subordinate to a more fundamental concern: the definition of the identity of the people of Israel. Even when narrating the infidelity of the north, the Chronicler focuses not on idolatry itself, but on adherence to the legitimate cult practised in the temple of Jerusalem: through this cult, the correct relationship with YHWH is maintained and the unity of the people of Israel is thus preserved.

2. The ungodly kings Ahaz and Manasseh

According to the Dtr, the height of impiety is reached by Manasseh, and according to the Chronicler by Ahaz. The two historical collections portray the gradual progression towards this height differently in their accounts of the behaviour of successive kings of Judah.

2.1. From Abijah to Ahaz

The Chronicler states that, after the death of Abijah, the new king Asa, at the beginning of his reign, “removed the foreign altars and high places, destroyed the sacred pillars and removed the sacred poles” (2 Chr 14:2). This statement is surprising: never before had the introduction of foreign cults into the country been described; the only reference to unspecified evil actions against YHWH is found in 2 Chr 12:14 concerning the last phase of Rehoboam’s reign; however, Abijah’s subsequent speech (2 Chr 13:10–12) excludes the possibility of idolatrous acts during his father’s reign, so the Chronicler’s judgement of Rehoboam should be understood as a general departure from God’s law (cf. 2 Chr 12:1). The sudden mention of high places at the beginning of Asa’s reign is undoubtedly an element of tension arising from the reworking of the *Vorlage*, which in some places is adopted without harmonization; however, it is also a sign of the lesser importance of the theme of idolatry compared to other criteria for judging the conduct of the rulers of Judah; in this assessment, the themes of seeking God or listening to the word of the prophets are more relevant (Vuaran, 2026, pp. 301–303). In 2 Chr 15:17, Asa is criticized for the presence of remaining high places, but the real censure of his actions concerns his failure to accept Hanani’s prophecy (16:7–10a), his injustice towards the people (16:10b) and his refusal to seek the Lord in sickness (16:12). Jehoshaphat is presented as a positive model, even though the high places are still present (20:33). Jehoram and Ahaziah suffer from the idolatry into which the house of Omri, to which Jehoshaphat had become related by marriage, had dragged the northern kingdom (21:13; 22:3–4). After the interlude of Athaliah’s reign, Jehoash and Amaziah both make promising starts but subsequently fall

into idolatry and impiety, and both die violently in palace conspiracies (24:18; 25:14). Uzziah and Jotham, on the other hand, did not fall into idolatry, but the former committed a serious cultic transgression, which led to divine punishment through leprosy (26:16–21). The assessment made by the Dtr was even harsher. Rehoboam is an idolater (1 K 14:22–24), and his son Abijam is no different (15:3). The assessments of Asa (15:11–15) and Jehoshaphat (22:43–44) are only partially positive, since their personal righteousness is not accompanied by the removal of the high places, while Jehoram and Ahaziah, as in the Chronicler, are dominated by the dynasty of Omri (2 K 8:18, 27), whose influence continues through Athaliah. For Jehoash, Amaziah, Azariah, and Jotham, the Dtr repeats the same formula: they did what was right, but the high places were not removed (12:2–3; 14:3–4; 15:3–4, 34–35). The presentation of these kings is much less extensive than in the Chronicler's account, since the cycles of Elijah and Elisha shift the focus of the narrative to the northern kingdom. It should be noted that these two prophets, especially Elijah, also intervene specifically against idolatry, which is therefore omnipresent in the Dtr and is particularly linked to the northern kingdom.

Overall, idolatry, which is present during the reigns of all the kings of Judah in the Dtr, is absent from the Chronicler's accounts of Rehoboam, Abijah, Uzziah and Jotham; although present during Jehoshaphat's reign, it does not affect the positive assessment of him; for Jehoash and Amaziah, on the other hand, it serves as the theological explanation for the military defeats and conspiracies that characterized their reigns.

2.2. Ahaz, a model of impiety for the Chronicler

The Chronicler reserves the role of the most impious monarch for Jotham's son, Ahaz. His impious behaviour is compared to the idolatry of the kings of Israel (2 Chr 28:2): he introduced the cult of Baal, also practising human sacrifice (28:2–4), then worshipped the Aramean deities of the Damascus pantheon, considering them more powerful than YHWH (28:22–25). His greatest impiety, however, was that he alone went so far as to commit the ultimate act of breaking with the worship of YHWH: closing the temple in Jerusalem.

Ahaz gathered together the utensils of the house of God and cut in pieces the utensils of the house of God. He shut up the doors of the house of the Lord and made himself altars in every corner of Jerusalem (2 Chr 28:24).

In the Chronicler's narrative, this change has the effect of preserving the value of the reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah, which are not affected by the behaviour of subsequent rulers. In particular, Ahaz's direct successor, his son Hezekiah, inaugurated a reform on the very first day of his reign, the central element of which was the reopening of the temple and the restoration of worship, with the celebration of Passover and the re-establishment of the Levitical priesthood (2 Chr 29–31); these elements are absent in 2 K 18:4, which merely mentions the destruction of the אֲשֵׁרָה and Moses' bronze serpent.

Alongside the destruction of legitimate worship in Judah, a curious event took place in the north, reported only by the Chronicler. At the time of King Ahaz, there was a prophet named Oded, otherwise unknown, who addressed the army of the northern kingdom as it was returning from Jerusalem to Samaria after defeating Judah.

⁹ But a prophet of the Lord was there [in Samaria] whose name was Oded; he went out to meet the army that came to Samaria and said to them, "Because the Lord, the God of your ancestors, was angry with Judah, he gave them into your hand, but you have killed them in a rage that has reached up to heaven. ¹⁰ Now you intend to subjugate the people of Judah and Jerusalem, male and female, as your slaves. But what have you except sins against the Lord your God? ¹¹ Now hear me, and send back the captives whom you have taken from your kindred, for the fierce wrath of the Lord is upon you" (2 Chr 28:9–11).

The prophet, a resident of Samaria addressing other northern Israelites, intervenes in defence of the kingdom of Judah, reviving a classic theme of prophecy: YHWH uses the armies of the enemies of the chosen people to punish their sins, but these enemies are not mere instruments devoid of agency, and they can in turn be punished for taking advantage of the situation and committing atrocities greater than those foreseen and permitted by YHWH. The Chronicler's innovation, however, consists in applying this theme not to pagan nations, but to

the relationship between Judah and Israel, whom the author describes as “brothers;” even though there had been a schism, and despite the author’s lack of interest in the fate of the north, their belonging to YHWH, “the God of your fathers” (v. 9), and consequently the spiritual kinship between the two peoples remain intact. The episode is in line with 2 Chr 11:1–4, in which Rehoboam is called upon by Shemaiah not to wage war against his brothers in the north. Furthermore, 2 Chr 28:9–11 is set against the background of the Mosaic law: in Lev 25:39–43, 46 it is forbidden to enslave another Jew and to treat a Jewish debtor harshly.

There are three charismatic figures operating in the north in Chronicles: in addition to Oded, Micaiah son of Imlah (2 Chr 18:7–27) and Elijah (2 Chr 21:12–15) are mentioned. Of these three figures, Micaiah and Elijah are common to the Dtr, although the episode concerning the latter has no parallel in 1–2 Kings. Oded, on the other hand, is a character entirely unique to the Chronicler, who therefore intentionally inserts this figure to emphasize that the north has not been abandoned by YHWH, but that his word can still be received through charismatic figures who operate there as they do in the south. The persistence of prophetic activity is indicative of the Chronicler’s conception, according to which the northern tribes, although schismatic and corrupt in their worship, are nevertheless considered to share the same fundamental Israelite identity as Judah.

The clear separation between prophecy and kingship is noteworthy: neither Pekah, king of the north, nor Ahaz, king of Judah, enters the scene; instead, the charismatic figure addresses the people, in particular the leaders of the army of Ephraim, some of whom listen to and carry out the divine command:

¹² Moreover, certain chiefs of the Ephraimites, Azariah son of Johanan, Berechiah son of Meshillemoth, Jehizkiah son of Shallum, and Amasa son of Hadlai, stood up against those who were coming from the war ¹³ and said to them, “You shall not bring the captives in here, for you propose to bring on us guilt against the Lord in addition to our present sins and guilt. For our guilt is already great, and there is fierce wrath against Israel.” ¹⁴ So the warriors left the captives and the plunder before the officials and all the assembly (2 Chr 28:12–14).

YHWH continues to assist the people of Judah, freeing the captives independently of the monarchy, which is entirely uninvolved in this episode. The dialogue between YHWH and his people continues uninterrupted despite the schisms and infidelities caused by the people's highest representatives. Thus, while the unfaithful king par excellence sits on the Davidic throne, the Chronicler highlights the faithfulness to YHWH present in the northern kingdom: at the time of Ahaz, even the northern tribes were better than him, since the leaders of Ephraim acted in obedience to the divine voice, which the Davidic king continued to reject.³ Furthermore, the author reassures his readers of YHWH's faithfulness to Judah: even when the king was ungodly, divine assistance to the chosen people did not fail.⁴ If we compare this passage with the account of Abijah's reign (2 Chr 13), we can also see a reversal of the situation described at the beginning of the division between north and south, when Judah, the people who had remained faithful to YHWH, opposed Israel, which was responsible for the sacrilegious religious schism; now, at the time of the wicked Ahaz, the northern tribes manifested their fidelity to God by listening to the word of a prophet (Jonker, 2021, pp. 210–212).

2.3. The rehabilitation of Manasseh

Particularly striking and in some ways disconcerting is the ease with which the Chronicler treats the figure of King Manasseh, whose portrayal is completely reversed from that in his *Vorlage*. In fact, in the Dtr, he is the wicked king par excellence, embodying the pinnacle of Israel's sinfulness and the greatest distance from God and his law. Having undone Hezekiah's reform (2 K 21:3), he exceeded even the pagan nations in

³ According to Amar, the Chronicler also conveys his negative assessment of Ahaz at the literary level, constructing chapter 28 in a deliberately fragmentary and confused manner, giving the reader a sense of the chaos prevailing during the evil king's reign (Amar, 2016, pp. 354–364).

⁴ This momentary rehabilitation of the northern Israelites should not be overemphasized: in the eyes of the Chronicler, they remain schismatics and an example of infidelity; only a few years after these events, when Hezekiah tried to involve them in his religious reform project, almost all of them rejected it with contempt (2 Chr 30:10–11), including the tribe of Ephraim, which is presented here as a positive point of comparison with Ahaz.

wickedness (21:9–11). The gravity of his sin was such that even Josiah's reform did not remedy it, but only delayed the final punishment: this is what the prophetess Huldah says when consulted by the king at the time of the discovery of the Book of the Law (22:15–20). Thus, after presenting Josiah's efforts and his successes in implementing his reform, the author concludes:

Still the Lord did not turn from the fierceness of his great wrath by which his anger was kindled against Judah because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him (2 K 23:26).

Consequently, when the time comes for the destruction of Jerusalem, it takes place

^{3b} to remove them [Judah] out of his sight, for the sins of Manasseh, for all that he had committed, ⁴ and also for the innocent blood that he had shed, for he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the Lord was not willing to pardon (2 K 24:3b–4).

In Chronicles, the story of Manasseh is completely reworked. After an initial phase of his reign marked by idolatry (33:1–10), the king is captured by the Assyrians and taken to Babylon (33:11). Driven by distress, Manasseh recognizes his sin and once again invokes YHWH, who has mercy on him and allows him to return to Jerusalem (33:12–13). A new phase in his reign then begins: the worship of YHWH is restored and the idols are eliminated (33:14–16). The Chronicler notes that something of the old worship remains: the people continue to sacrifice on the high places, to YHWH rather than to foreign gods (33:17). In Chronicles, it is common to find accounts of reigns divided into two phases, with transitions from impiety to righteousness or vice versa; however, due to the extent of the changes compared to the Dtr, the presentation of Manasseh plays a distinctive role.

The turning point is his conversion during his captivity in Babylon under the king of Assyria (33:10–13; see Vuaran, 2024, pp. 536–539). Some scholars have explained this change by invoking the doctrine of immediate retribution to account for the exceptional length of his 55-year

reign and his peaceful death (e.g., Japhet, 1993, p. 1002). However, this explanation is not sufficient if we consider that the wicked Ahaz died in peace (2 Chr 28:27) at the age of 36 after a 16-year reign (2 Chr 28:1). The principle of retribution is applied by the Chronicler in a flexible manner and always in the service of other concerns (Morrison, 2025); it is therefore not sufficient to explain the complete rewriting of the story of the man who, according to 2 Kings, is the very cause of the exile. The different assessment of Manasseh must rather be explained by considering each literary work as a whole and its author's purpose. The Dtr intends to explain the history of the people, and the exile in particular, as the consequence of a long series of infidelities and betrayals of the covenant and the Law, which he systematically records and in the light of which each ruler is evaluated positively or negatively. The Chronicler, on the other hand, presents God's action in history in the light of the new possibilities that the return from exile created for the people. Having established, on the basis of the Dtr, which sin led to exile, the Chronicler reinterprets the past according to different criteria in order to give new meaning to a history of the people that would otherwise have lacked contemporary relevance. Thus, in Chronicles, the inevitability of punishment is not emphasized, but the experience of repentance takes on a new centrality (Ben Zvi, 2013, pp. 125–126). The Chronicler deliberately reverses the figure of the wicked king of the Dtr to highlight the broad scope for obtaining God's forgiveness, and makes him an exemplary model of one who, through conversion, receives divine mercy (Knoppers, 2011, p. 226). Thus Manasseh becomes the image of the Jewish people themselves who, after ignoring the prophets, were only temporarily led into exile in Babylon and from there, once they repented, returned to their own land and re-established worship around the temple (Mosis, 1973, pp. 192–194; Williamson, 1982, pp. 389–390).

2.4. The cause of the exile to Babylon

Having exonerated Manasseh, the Chronicler must necessarily modify the interpretation of the exile to Babylon which, as we have seen, the

Dtr attributed to the indelible sin of this king. The deportation is motivated not so much by idolatrous behaviour as by the rejection of the prophets and the neglect of the temple and its worship:

¹² He [Zedekiah] did what was evil in the sight of the Lord his God. He did not humble himself before the prophet Jeremiah who spoke from the mouth of the Lord. ¹³ He also rebelled against King Nebuchadnezzar, who had made him swear by God; he stiffened his neck and hardened his heart against turning to the Lord, the God of Israel. ¹⁴ All the leading priests and the people also were exceedingly unfaithful, following all the abominations of the nations, and they polluted the house of the Lord that he had consecrated in Jerusalem. ¹⁵ The Lord, the God of their ancestors, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place, ¹⁶ but they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words, and scoffing at his prophets until the wrath of the Lord against his people became so great that there was no remedy. (2 Chr 36:12–16).

Perhaps reflecting the theological influence of Ezekiel and his emphasis on personal responsibility,⁵ the Chronicler does not assign blame to a single king, nor does he go back to previous generations to identify the cause of the exile: instead, he highlights the negative role of the reigning king at the time of the deportation, Zedekiah, and extends responsibility to the leaders, priests, and all the people, giving a communal dimension to the sin that caused the ruin of the entire nation.

5 Regarding the relationship between Chronicles and Ezekiel, we will limit ourselves to observing that the Chronicler most likely draws on the exilic prophet's account of an oath between Zedekiah and Nebuchadnezzar. The Dtr, in fact, does not mention it: "Zedekiah rebelled against the king of Babylon" (2 K 24:20). It was Ezekiel who condemned the breaking of the oath and alliance that Zedekiah had made with Nebuchadnezzar, to whom he owed his very accession to the throne (Ezek 17:13–20). Similarly, in Chronicles, the assessment of Zedekiah's political behaviour goes beyond the purely diplomatic or military sphere to acquire a religious dimension, so that the Babylonian king unwittingly becomes a vehicle of God's will: the oath of alliance ratified in the name of YHWH is the basis on which Zedekiah could have maintained a proper relationship with God; his violation of it also constitutes an act of impiety that brings divine wrath upon him and upon all the people who, together with him, had disobeyed the divine words.

Conclusions

The theme of idolatry is certainly present in the Book of Chronicles, but the texts examined show that its presentation differs from that in the Dtr. Suffice it to note that the event that introduced idolatry, namely the establishment of the temples of the northern kingdom, has no place in the account of Jeroboam's schism, which instead focuses on the separation between the two kingdoms, considered an expression of God's free will, while the idolatrous context in which, according to the Dtr, even Solomon and Rehoboam are immersed, is completely absent. In the texts analysed, we can note some common elements that reduce the prominence of the theme of idolatry in the Chronicler's work.

Centrality of the temple of Jerusalem and the integrity of its worship

In all the texts, the focus is on Jerusalem and the worship offered to YHWH in its temple. Certainly, idolatry stands in direct opposition to this worship; however, it is only one factor in assessing Israel's fidelity to its God, which is expressed primarily in its bond with the place he has chosen.

Thus, at the beginning of the history of the two kingdoms, Judah is presented as completely faithful; Jeroboam's sin is mentioned only in relation to the south: in its consequences for the migration of faithful Israelites to Jerusalem and in the heated confrontation between the first king of the north and Rehoboam's son, Abijah. Uzziah's sin is not idolatry, but usurpation of priestly prerogatives. Ahaz's impiety is manifested not only in his idolatrous practices, but even more so in the closure of the temple; consequently, Hezekiah's reform is not anti-idolatrous, but aims to restore the overall functioning of the sanctuary. The story of Manasseh shows that idolatry is a forgivable transgression if conversion occurs: not only does Josiah's reform in the Chronicler's account have full effect, but Manasseh himself receives YHWH's forgiveness. The exile is therefore not caused by idolatry; instead, it results from the refusal to listen to God through the prophets and the lack of care for his sanctuary. First, the rejection of God's word includes, but is not

limited to, idolatry; idolatry is significant as an outward sign of the heart's detachment from YHWH. Second, care for the temple consists in ensuring the conditions necessary for its functioning according to the rules issued by David, which describe every aspect of worship in detail; this includes a warning against the continuing danger of idolatry, since Jerusalemite worship is exclusive,⁶ but care is also expressed by respecting the prerogatives of the tribe of Levi, both by enabling and guaranteeing the performance of its members' duties and by refraining from encroaching on their sphere of responsibility, which would constitute an abuse of power.⁷

The people and idolatry

The texts examined share an apparently secondary element: the direct involvement of the people in national affairs. While the Dtr focuses his attention on kings and their religious policies, in Chronicles the people also act autonomously, sometimes even taking a leading role.

At the time of Jeroboam, the Levites and even Israelites belonging to other tribes residing in the north migrated independently to Judah in order to preserve their loyalty to YHWH. In the time of Ahaz, whose impiety reached the point of ordering the closure of the temple, YHWH did not abandon the people, but through the prophet Oded aroused the compassion of the Ephraimites, confirming his continued support: the king, however important to the relationship between God and Israel, was not an absolute and indispensable mediator. On the contrary, towards the end of Manasseh's reign, there was a deterioration in the behaviour of the people, who continued to frequent the high places even though Manasseh had turned away from his idolatry, although, as the Chronicler notes, they did so "for YHWH their God" (2 Chr 33:17). In the tragedy of exile, the entire people participates in transgression,

⁶ Japhet relates the theme of idolatry to the "principle of exclusivity" that characterizes the worship of YHWH in the only temple in Jerusalem (Japhet, 1989, p. 221).

⁷ This abuse of power is carried out, for example, by Uzziah, who is punished with leprosy not for an act of idolatry, but for an abuse of power against the priests (2 Chr 26:16–21).

which is expressed in the rejection of the prophets and the desecration of the temple.

In the Chronicler's view, there is collective solidarity (Vuaran, 2026, pp. 304–306), whereby the people not only shares responsibility with its sovereign, but is also held accountable independently of him. At the end of the book, in fact, it will be up to the people to carry out Cyrus' mandate (2 Chr 36:22–23) by rebuilding and taking direct care of the temple, without the mediation of a sovereign who will no longer be present. Post-exilic Israel, now deprived of political autonomy, is not deprived of the assistance of its God, but is entrusted with substantial responsibility: called first and foremost to be united, it must be aware that fidelity to YHWH is essential to its communal life, and the primary responsibility for maintaining this fidelity will rest with the people. This requires avoiding not only deviations towards other gods, but also, above all, transgressions that endanger the sanctuary, the geographical and ideal centre of Israel's identity.

Abstract

Unicity of God and idolatry: is it still a problem for the Chronicler?

One of the central themes of the so-called “Deuteronomistic History” is idolatry, the quintessential sin of the Israelite people and the root cause of the accusations levelled by the prophets who feature in these narratives. Is this also the case in the Book of Chronicles? This article aims to highlight the distinctive perspective from which the Chronicler addresses the question of God and the nature of his relationship with the chosen people, with variations compared to Samuel and Kings that reflect the different historical contexts in which the two literary works were composed and the changing needs of the Jewish people, particularly regarding the definition of their identity. The different presentation and interpretation of events yields a partially different conception of the relationship with YHWH and, consequently, a different understanding of the characteristics of faithfulness proposed to the Chronicler's audience: the focus of interest is the temple in Jerusalem, around which the life of the people revolves and which is a defining element of Israel's very identity.

Keywords: Chronicles, idolatry, worship, temple of Jerusalem

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