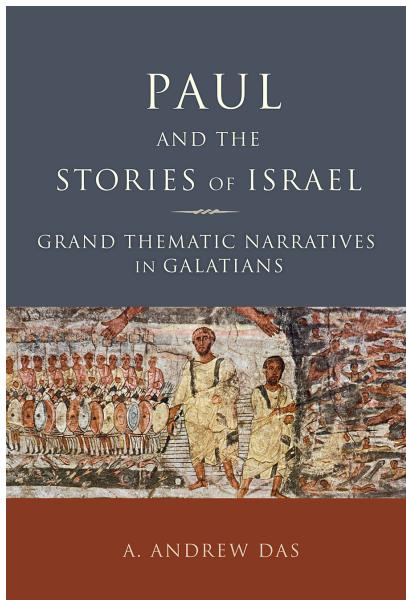


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A. Andrew Das

Paul and the Stories of Israel: Grand Thematic Narratives in Galatians

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Most interpreters of Galatians are guided by often unspoken assumptions about the narrative substructure of Paul’s train of thought. In recent decades several “grand thematic narratives” have been proposed by various scholars. In his book Andrew Das submits six of those narratives to close scrutiny.

In his introductory chapter Das acknowledges that Paul “as an educated Israelite of the Pharisee sect” had “inherited key narratives as components of his own thought.” Paul “draws on the scriptural heritage of Israel as he writes to the churches he started” (3). Being “a Diaspora Jew … some of these narratives may derive from the Greco-Roman milieu as well” (4). The first step is the categorization of the terms used for quotations and “echoes.” Paying respect to Richard Hays and building on the work of Stanley Porter and Christopher Stanley (4–6), Das presents the various terms and their difficulties (7–13). Das introduces the heuristic instrument of the “grand thematic narrative” as proposed by Porter. Another preparatory step is Das’s discussion of Hays’s “seven criteria for detecting echoes of the scriptures” (16–20), followed by a detailed discussion of the competence of the audience and their recognition of scriptural appropriation (20–28). Having set the stage, Das calls for a more critical examination of the category of the grand thematic narrative in particular. For practical reasons Das limits his book to the

interpretation of Galatians. Five of the narratives stem from the Jewish Scriptures. A sixth narrative is derived from pagan civilization and deals with the emperor cult.

Das opens chapter 2 by summarizing the narrative called “The Gentile Influx into Zion” in just one page. Leading Old Testament texts are several Isaianic passages and one each from Micah and Zechariah. The book of Tobit is part of this narrative, as are passages from 1 Enoch and the Sybilline Oracles. In the view of some New Testament scholars, Paul’s letter to the Galatians is indebted to this biblical and Second Temple pattern. This narrative was developed by T. Donaldson, elaborated by N. T. Wright and R. N. Longenecker and adopted by B. Witherington. One of Donaldson’s arguments is the distribution of “we” and “you” (pl.) in Galatians. Das asks three critical questions: Is the “we-you-pattern” convincing for Gal 3–4? Does this pattern hold in the remainder of the letter? Why does the “influx into Zion” not appear elsewhere in Paul’s letters? The greater part of this chapter discusses the interpretation of the we-you pattern. At the very end Das asks why Paul bothers to make the distinction between “we” and “you” if “we” is inclusive all the time. His answer is “because of the situation in Galatians using ‘we’ Paul softens his tone by including himself with his audience.” Finally, Das dismisses the influx pattern because it would unnecessarily complicate Paul’s logic.

The next two chapters deal with the Abraham story from different perspectives. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the way Paul sees the relation between the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants. In a brief presentation of the New Perspective on Paul, Das suggests that “elective nomism” would be a far more accurate label for E. P. Sanders’s description of Judaism than “covenantal nomism.” Next Das tries a definition of (and a distinction between) covenant and commandment. Ending his survey of Second Temple Judaism, Das concludes that “in most instances a connection between covenant and obligation/commandments is clear. Paul’s letters reflect these trends.” Turning to Gal 3:15–17 and 4:21–31, respectively, Das thinks that *covenant* is a concept introduced by Paul’s rivals. The apostle actually prefers *promise* for God’s dealing with Abraham. He therefore severs the Mosaic law from the Abrahamic covenant. In Gal 4:21–31 Paul distinguishes between *two* Abrahamic covenants to counter his rivals’ promotion of the law on the basis of Genesis. Das (quoting Dunn) concludes that an explicit covenant theology is not at the forefront of Paul’s argument. After short treatments of passages on 2 Corinthians and Romans, Das concludes that “Paul’s thinking regarding ‘covenant’ must be discerned from his own writings without recourse to what ‘must have’ been the case.”

Chapter 4 discusses Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac. After a brief explanation of the term *Aqedah* (binding), Das provides an overview of the Aqedah in twentieth-century Pauline interpretation as well as in Second Temple Judaism, highlighting both Abraham’s obedience and Isaac’s willingness. Summing up the latter period, Das states that in texts

such as Jubilees and 4 Maccabees there is no “atoning implication.” While in Pseudo-Philo there are traces of a martyrdom motive, it still is not vicarious. Concluding a detailed discussion of the Aqedah in Galatians, Das states that Paul—if reflecting the binding of Isaac—is doing so in a subversive way. The emphasis in Galatians is not on the obedience and faithfulness of Abraham (and Isaac) but on the faith of Christ and the believer. Paul wants his hearers to keep their eyes exclusively on the faithful sacrifice of God’s own Son, Jesus Christ. Das refers here to Rom 8:32, but he could have quoted Gal 3:1 (“Christ portrayed crucified”).

Several authors have detected allusions to the exodus in Gal 4:1–7. These are dealt with in chapter 5. Das scrutinizes the six key arguments brought forward by James M. Scott (*Adoption*, 1992) and Sylvia Keesmaat (*Paul*, 1999) supporting the transition of the ancient Hebrews from slaves into adoptive sons. Special attention is given to both Roman and Hellenistic legal backgrounds of adoption and the relationship between an heir who is still a minor and his guardians and managers. After a careful analysis, Das concludes that Paul’s language in Gal 4:1–7 simply does not allude to the exodus with any particular clarity. It is Greco-Roman legal theory and wills that offer much better, more useful parallels.

Yet another narrative is connected with the exodus theme. Chapter 6 investigates the possible “grand theme” of the Spirit as “exodus cloud.” Central in this narrative are passages from Haggai and Isaiah, followed by texts from Nehemiah and Ps 143 (LXX 142). After painstaking discussions, Das concludes that the Spirit is not identified with the exodus cloud in any of the Old Testament passages proposed by William Wilder. Revisiting Gal 5:18, Das takes a closer look at the combination of lead (*agō*) and Spirit (*pneuma*) in the LXX. Paul may be alluding to Ps 143 and echoing Isa 63, but when doing so he is severing and subverting the Spirit’s association with Moses’s law in contemporary Jewish thought.

Chapter 7 deals with a topic that is not scriptural. The cult of the Roman emperor was a sensitive matter for most Jews. Giving divine honor to a human being was out of the question. Moses and the Prophets are adamant about that. So it is no surprise that Das adds this theme to his book. First he summarizes the development of imperial cult. Next he investigates Gal 6:12–13, a passage supposed to reflect the narrative of loyalty and worship of the emperor. After investigating the cultural context of imperial restrictions on the cult and Judaism as a recognized *religio licita*, Das looks at instances of Jewish participation in the imperial cult. Zooming in on the enforcement of this cult, Das probes the growth of the Christian movement and the beginning of the persecution by the Romans. Evaluating the anti-imperial reading of Gal 6:12–13, Das concludes that there is

no evidence that the imperial cult is a motivating factor behind any reference to persecutions in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

In his final chapter Das sums up the “Lessons Learned” and points to “The Path Forward in Methodology” (217–38). The first lesson is the need to anchor narratives in clear quotations or allusions. There should be a unique parallel in wording, syntax, concept, or cluster of motifs in the same order or structure. Idolatry was rampant in the diaspora, but the text of Galatians nowhere concretely alludes to the emperor or imperial cult. Second, the audience should be taken more seriously. Paul uses his letter to the Galatians as a form of crisis management. Everything he writes must support his goal. An author-oriented approach is not helpful in this case. The letter must appeal to the scriptural competence of its readers and auditors. The audience may differ in levels of competence, but at least the local opinion leaders should become convinced. Third, a narrative becomes more plausible when it can be traced in Second Temple Judaism. For instance, the near identification of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants is an example, but there are also other traditions where two covenants are differentiated to some degree. Fourth, simply identifying potential narratives does not yet answer the question about how Paul *uses* the narrative. He may be reinterpreting or even subverting a narrative—as is obvious when Paul puts the Sinaitic covenant in the same “column” as Hagar and slavery. Next Das draws attention to two dangers: overenthusiasm for parallels that do not withstand closer scrutiny and the “Danger of Illegitimate Totality Transfer.” The way in which Paul uses quotation, allusion, and narratives in his letter should decide to what extent a narrative is operative in Galatians.

In his section on the “Path Forward” (225–36), Das introduces the category of “thematic parallel,” which is even weaker than an echo. Those parallels, however, do not reflect a clear connection between two literary texts. Das takes on Matthew Harmon’s book on Paul’s Isaianic gospel in Galatians, which contains promising criteria. The book has a tendency to overemphasize rather common parallels in the LXX into a thematic parallel, while paying little attention to the differences between Isaiah and Paul. Discussing Harmon as a last example, Das drives the message home: make sure that a certain narrative is really present in the Pauline text. The book concludes with an extensive bibliography (239–69), an index of modern authors (271–77), followed by an index of ancient sources, including biblical sources (279–304).

From the outset it is clear that Das will take a critical stance towards these grand thematic narratives. He compares them with “Greek sirens” or, in more modern terms, “a computer virus” that “works its way into every construct of Paul’s theology” (15). Against this background Das formulates his intentions. “What is needed is a testing ground,” a study focused on a single Pauline letter.... Galatians is ideal since it has inspired several

grand thematic narratives” (15–16). Das himself appears as an eloquent and intelligent defender of the “Lutheran approach”—as he admits in the preface to his commentary on Galatians, although “The Lutheran Confessions do not act as a hermeneutical or exegetical lens to interpret Scripture” (A. Andrew Das, *Galatians* [St. Louis: Concordia, 2014], xiv–xv).

Das fully acknowledges Paul’s Jewish background. He writes, “The Jewish apostle’s debt to his scriptural heritage is indisputable,” but he rightly insists that a “critical discernment is necessary in the midst of enthusiasm. The investigator must resist what cannot be demonstrated on the basis of sound methodology and good evidence” (237).

The principal adversary seems to be N. T. Wright, who is targeted in every chapter except the one on “The Spirit as Exodus Cloud.” In the preface (ix) Wright is summarized by Das saying, “the apostle Paul is incomprehensible apart from the narrative logic that forms the substructure of his theology.” In the introductory chapter Wright is said to be “under their spell” because he “has championed … many of the scriptural grand thematic narratival proposals over the years” (15).

Das wisely focuses on the description and evaluation of the thematic narratives. His criteria (in the first and final chapters) supplies us with valuable tools to transcend such subjective categories. He shows a keen hermeneutical awareness in saying that “unspoken assumptions [by Paul] that would have been clear [to the audience] in a first-century context have since been lost in the intervening millennia” (ix). However, this is not carte blanche for imaginary grand thematic narratives, nor—we may add—for mirror-reading or fanciful constructions from the author’s mind. In chapter 2 Das rightly dismisses the interpretation that the second-person plural always refers to the gentile Galatians, while the first-person plural always refers to the Jews. Das instead suggests that the first-person plural always includes both Jews and gentiles, while the alteration is purely rhetorical in nature. The passages he explicitly refers to (60) are part and parcel of the epistolary communication and hardly played a role in Paul’s train of thoughts in Gal 3–4. In this case Das himself seems to have fallen in the trap of unjust generalization.

In chapter 8 Das discusses Paul’s identification with the Suffering Servant in Isaiah. Early on (15 n. 66) he suggested that the “Suffering Servant motif … drawn from … Isaiah 40–55 … is a better potential example” than the “fulfillment of Isaiah 66” taking shape in the “Gentile influx into Zion” (ch. 2). It may be interesting to note here that Luke, who is in some way one of the first interpreters of Pauline tradition, also uses a text from Isa 49 as a key to Paul’s mission (see, e.g., Bart J. Koet, “Paul, a Light for the Gentiles? Paul as Interpreter of Scriptures in Galatians 1:13–16 and in the Acts of the Apostles,” in *Paulinische Schriftrezeption: Grundlagen—Ausprägungen—Wirkungen—Wertungen*, ed.

Florian Wilk and Markus Öhler, FRLANT 268 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017], 249–74). We agree that for Galatians the fulfillment of Isa 66 is not particularly helpful. Instead, Isa 40–55 should not be reduced to the theme of the Suffering Servant, since Gal 4:27 contains a formulaic quotation from Isa 54:1, a chapter that is not dealing with the Suffering Servant.

Das wrote his important commentary in 2014. In the present book he has again provided Pauline scholarship with valuable methodological reflections and examples for future studies.