

1-1-2001

## Book Review: "Kings and Prophets" by C. Grottanelli

Daniel Smith-Christopher

Loyola Marymount University, [dchristopher@lmu.edu](mailto:dchristopher@lmu.edu)

---

### Repository Citation

Smith-Christopher, Daniel, "Book Review: "Kings and Prophets" by C. Grottanelli" (2001). *Theological Studies Faculty Works*. 325. [http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo\\_fac/325](http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/theo_fac/325)

### Recommended Citation

Smith-Christopher, Daniel. Book Review: C. Grottanelli, *Kings and Prophets*(OUP:NY, 1999). *Ancient History Bulletin*, 15:4, 188-190.

Gardiner's, but it updates it with many new entries and corrections. It lacks the abundance of citations included in Gardiner's list, but this is not a significant loss. Allen's textbook should now be the first text of choice for teaching Egyptian.

WILLIAM J. FULCO, S.J., LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

### *Israel/Palestine*

The title of Grottanelli's work, *Kings and Prophets*,<sup>9</sup> is strangely unrepresentative of what this book is actually about. Although issues of Monarchical and Prophetic ideologies in Biblical texts are occasionally addressed, the methodology is unusual and drives the direction of the thematic and comparative literary analysis throughout. It is important, therefore, to identify this approach. Grottanelli is interested in the relation of mythology and narrative historical description. By presenting a series of readings of mythological texts, e.g., the Baal cycles in Ugaritic poetry and classical 'cognate tales', Grottanelli shows how the writing of historical narrative in ancient surrounding cultures are historicized *versions* of these same mythical tales and cycles. These tales, Grottanelli asserts, deeply influenced the construction of early Hebrew narratives as well as the features necessary for the telling of the story.

Let one example suffice to *illustrate*, even while acknowledging that Grottanelli's complex arguments cannot be fairly reduced to a single example. In the third chapter, 'The Enemy Kind is a Monster', Grottanelli takes up an earlier suggestion that the destruction of the golden calf episode in Exodus 32 is deeply influenced in form and content by the ancient Baal vs. Yam cycle—the storm god vs. the sea god. Grottanelli asserts that the Biblical 'narratives maintain the traditional form of the cosmic battle myth that in many ancient mythologies signified the conflict between chaos and the divine producer of cosmic order in the primeval time of creation...' (50). Similar influences are found in 1 Samuel 15 (the killing of Agag) and Judges 3, Ehud's killing of Eglon. In concluding his analysis of Judges 3, Grottanelli concludes that this story is '...the 'actualized' version of a mythical battle with the chaotic monster' (55).

What we are left with, suggests Grottanelli, is not 'history' in the 'common, modern, sense of the word', but rather a 'sacred narrative similar in function to mythology' (68). This is hardly a new claim, but Grottanelli's approach certainly is novel, even if it seems at least somewhat reminiscent of Gunkel's old arguments of pervasive Babylonian influences on the Hebrew Text. Grottanelli's analysis raises interesting questions about mythological influences on the construction of Biblical narrative. The reader cannot help but sense some strain in making many of these narratives fit the proposed model, especially when Grottanelli skips over conveniently dismissed 'perversions' of the historical-critical questions of provenance and dating of passages, especially in Genesis (200 n. 8).

What one misses is the absence of any sociologically informed discussions about the social sources of certain folklore elements, and the social functionality of writing and text production *outside of official circles*. This is glossed over by Grottanelli's setting up of a (in my opinion, false) dichotomy between Prophecy as *oral* as opposed to textual production. Can there be oppositional *texts*? Amos? Or Daniel?

Grottanelli's work, while suggestive at times, suffers from some of the common problems of post-modern literary analysis. The comparisons too often seem strained, and his narrative is at times unnecessarily dense with little attention paid to questions such as social provenance, political setting, social behaviors. This is particularly odd in a book claiming to deal with 'Kings and Prophets' and 'Monarchical power.'

Undena Publications, 1977), and J.B. Callender, *Middle Egyptian, Afroasiatic Dialects*, Vol. 2 (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1975).

<sup>9</sup> C. Grottanelli. *Kings and Prophets*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. ISBN 0-19-507196-4. \$49.95.

There is increasing interest in ancient Jewish writing about the Bible—and specifically expansions and retellings of Biblical traditions—beginning from the earliest signs of Hellenistic influence in the late 3rd century BCE and into the common era of Jewish and Christian writing. R.S. Kraemer's study of the text identified variously as 'Joseph and Aseneth' or, as Kraemer prefers, simply 'Aseneth', is a fine contribution to this important work.<sup>10</sup>

'Aseneth' is a significant expansion of the story of Joseph's marriage to the daughter of Potiphara, an Egyptian priest, briefly summarized in Genesis 41:45. What the original, biblical Joseph tales (in their present form undoubtedly exilic, e.g. 6th Century BCE) consider obviously non-problematic—the marriage of a Jewish male with a foreign female (and indeed a female of a priestly family of a pagan religion)—clearly becomes not only problematic, but the source of considerable fascination in the period when Jewish contact with the non-Jewish world reaches unprecedented levels of interaction and involvement, especially in Ptolemaic Alexandria. Kraemer divides her analysis into two main parts, 'Reinterpreting Aseneth', where she carefully analyzes comparative texts and possible sources of imagery and references, and 'Relocating Aseneth', which takes up issues of date, authorial identity, and provenance.

Kraemer takes issue with a considerable amount of previous work on the story of Aseneth. C. Burchard's standard translation, in Charlesworth's *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (1985), dates the work between the first Century BCE and Second Century CE. But Kraemer sees little basis for dating earlier than fourth century CE. Kraemer suggests that the shorter Greek version of the text is older than the longer, expanded versions—again in contrast to others who have argued for a later 'summarized' version. Kraemer's suggested sequence, however, allows a fascinating analysis of the meaning of the expansions (helpfully set in bold type for each passage analyzed) by means of a detailed comparison with late Jewish texts, some classical sources, and occasional Rabbinic materials. I sometimes found possible comparisons with large Scriptural material to be overlooked (especially on fasting, 96-7), but generally found her arguments persuasive. When she arrives at her interesting chapter on the author of the work, Kraemer exhibits great scholarly care in concluding that whether it is a Jewish, or Christian, work is impossible to tell, although she 'tips slightly' toward the more likely possibility that it was a Syrian Christian work.

Kraemer's concern with the literary sources of the work provides a much richer reading of the story, but I found that my own questions about the possible social, and especially *political*, implications of the story to be outside Kraemer's areas of interest. Stories like Daniel, Esther, and Joseph were cleverly revisited in Late Antiquity at least partly because of the intercultural contact, and the importance of issues about living under the dominion of foreign emperors. To have a story dealing at length with the necessary *transformation* of an Egyptian woman before she is an acceptable wife for Joseph is not only to raise the obvious issues of conversion, but to suggest (like Nebuchadnezzar's various transformations in Daniel 1-6) a political message of what one is *leaving behind* (e.g. Aseneth is not only an acceptable wife to Joseph after her dramatic prayers and transformations, but she is *no longer Egyptian*). That I would have enjoyed reading Kraemer's thoughts along these lines, however, is another way to say that I found her work meticulously argued, highly suggestive, and carefully researched—and thus the reader wishes for more!

DANIEL L. SMITH-CHRISTOPHER, LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

For many years visitors entering the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem saw along the corridor a selection of very well-preserved unpublished and not-to-be photographed documents emanating from Nahal Hever and related sites. Finally these and associated texts in Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek have been published in the series *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert*

<sup>10</sup> R.K. Kraemer. *When Aseneth Met Joseph*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. ISBN 0-19-511475-2. Pp. vii+190. \$60.00.