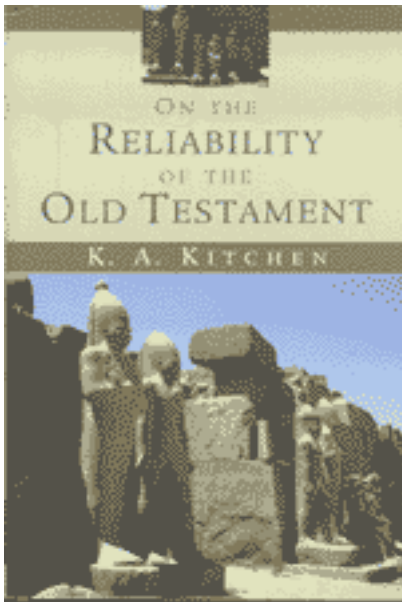


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On the Reliability of the Old Testament

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Kenneth A. Kitchen is Personal and Brunner Professor Emeritus of Egyptology and Honorary Research Fellow at the School of Archaeology, Classics, and Oriental Studies, University of Liverpool, England. He has enjoyed a long, distinguished career that has produced a stream of scholarly works. In addition to being a recognized expert on New Kingdom Egypt, he has regularly interacted with the world of biblical studies on issues involving the relationship between the Old Testament and the wider field of Near Eastern studies. He has previously authored two monographs that are similar in conception to the present volume: *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966) and *The Bible in Its World: The Bible and Archaeology Today* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979).

In *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* Kitchen contributes a spirited addition to the minimalist-maximalist debate. His stated purpose (2) is to answer two related questions raised in response to recent revisionists: (1) Did all of the Old Testament books originate in the late postexilic/early Hellenistic period (ca. 400–200 B.C.E.)? (2) Are they essentially works of fiction with little or no relationship to the history of the ancient Near East during circa 2000–400 B.C.E.?

Kitchen answers both of these questions with an emphatic no. This is no surprise because many scholars, liberal or conservative, have been unmoved by the arguments of revisionists such as Davies, Lemche, and Thompson. In fact, on these basic questions Kitchen's work is similar to that of William G. Dever's recent *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). But as one reads the text, a more ambitious goal comes to light. Kitchen does more than merely argue that the Old Testament preserves historical *memories* from the early periods. He also contends vigorously that much of the Old Testament was in fact *written* much earlier than is generally believed by scholars. While allowing for the later updating of language and place names, Kitchen avers that individual books were substantially products of persons with close ties to the people and events included within them. Thus, Kitchen concludes that the Old Testament as a whole is historically reliable and much more ancient than is commonly recognized.

Kitchen divides the Old Testament "story" into seven segments: (1) primeval/proto-history, (2) the patriarchs, (3) sojourn in Egypt and exodus, (4) settlement in Canaan, (5) united monarchy, (6) divided monarchy, and (7) exile and return. Each of these receives a chapter-length treatment in which he describes the content and aims of the biblical literature and then proceeds to assess how its features, customs, and geography correlate with the available extrabiblical evidence. He begins with the period of the divided monarchy because it is the best attested in nonbiblical sources. After working through the time of the exile and return, Kitchen treats the different epochs in reverse order from the united monarchy back to Israel's primeval/proto-history. Kitchen also adds a chapter in which he compares Israelite prophecy with its wider Near Eastern counterparts. In each chapter the essential core of the biblical witness is judged to be reliable.

Kitchen's principal method is to muster evidence from the study of the ancient Near East as it relates to the biblical narrative. He compares the events, characters, and geography mentioned in the Bible with explicit textual and archaeological data. Most scholars will have no problem with the results of this line of inquiry. The debatable element in Kitchen's methodology is the high value that he places on indirect or implicit evidence. For example, Kitchen argues strongly that the treaties and covenants of the Old Testament can be dated by the typology of known Near Eastern treaties and covenants. This stands at the basis of Kitchen's insistence that the covenants found in Exodus-Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Josh 24 are unambiguously products of the late thirteenth-early twelfth centuries B.C.E. Throughout the various chapters Kitchen uses "indirect" evidence to demonstrate the reliability of the biblical record. If a text can be shown to fit its putative historical context on the basis of background evidence, there is no warrant for positing a later date for its composition or for judging it to be unreliable as a historical source.

In a lengthy conclusion (449–500) Kitchen does not merely reiterate the answers to the two questions raised against the claims of modern day “minimalists.” Besides expected critiques of Davies, Lemche, and Thompson, Kitchen expands the definition of “minimalist” to include some of the work of scholars such as William Dever and Israel Finkelstein. In addition, he includes a critique of the work of “minimalists” of the past 150–200 years. Somewhat tongue in cheek, he divides these scholars into three groups: (1) “Late Period” (e.g., Thompson and Lemche); (2) “Middle Period” (the 1970s; e.g., Redford, Van Seters, and Thompson [again?]); and (3) “Early Period” (late nineteenth century–1950s; e.g., Wellhausen). Kitchen takes issue with these scholars (and others) over two alleged errors. First, they are wrongly influenced by earlier higher-critical theories regarding authorship and sources. Second, they are too quick to judge elements in the Bible to be fictional accounts. The fatal flaw behind both of these mistakes, according to Kitchen, lies in the failure to take seriously the evidence provided by the Near Eastern background.

On the Reliability of the Old Testament is richly documented with one hundred pages of endnotes. There are also forty plates of maps, site sketches, and reproductions of key artifacts. The volume closes with separate subject and Scripture indices.

The strength of Kitchen’s accomplishment rests in two related areas. First of all, Kitchen’s expertise in the primary sources from several millennia of Near Eastern history is evident. Students in particular will benefit from the exposure to a wide range of textual and material data that Kitchen discusses and documents in this text. Second, Kitchen engages the whole of the biblical narrative. Many recent studies spend the bulk of their pages on the united monarchy and later periods. Kitchen reverses this trend by spending about half of the text in an examination of the narrative found in Genesis–Judges. It is for these periods that Kitchen relies the most heavily on “indirect evidence.”

If Kitchen does credibly demonstrate that the Old Testament literature contains unambiguous memories of second and early first millennia names and practices, a number of weaknesses remain. First, many scholars will question his use of indirect/implicit evidence. Simply showing that a feature in the Old Testament could be ancient does not prove that it is. Kitchen attempts to buttress his own position by arguing that it is unrealistic for scholars to demand direct evidence that cannot exist, that is, records kept on papyri that have long since been lost or reports of *defeats* on the monuments of pharaohs. Kitchen is often associated with the phrase “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” While this remains a helpful caution against arguments from silence, it is affected by the law of diminishing return: At what point does the absence of evidence become decisive?

Second, too much of his argumentation is based on charges that Egyptologists and other Near Eastern specialists use more objective methods than do their biblicist counterparts and that there is no comparable data in the Near East that is analogous to the higher-critical theories espoused in biblical studies. Neither of these charges is accurate. There are certainly Near Eastern specialists with “minimalist” leanings, and there are credible parallels for critical models found in the ancient Near East. For examples, see Tigay’s *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

Finally, Kitchen’s work joins in the unfortunate ad hominem rhetoric that has found a home in too much of the recent writing about ancient Israel. Rather than allowing his argumentation to refute his opponents, he too frequently questions the intelligence of other scholars (e.g., “a series of *ignoranti*” [111] or “dumb-cluck socio-anthropologists” [467]) or their motivation (e.g., “a simple indulgence in academic ego massage [‘Look how clever I can be!’]” [390]).

In all likelihood, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* will not change too many minds. Kitchen has proffered similar arguments in his writings for decades. History will be the final judge of the ongoing methodological debates. Yet Kitchen’s voice is important and provides a needed challenge to certain scholarly movements that have dismissed much of the biblical record as an unreliable source for historical study. His work demonstrates clearly that there is a greater level of plausibility for the antiquity and reliability of much of the Old Testament literature than scholars often acknowledge. But in the end, plausibility is not the same as probability, and the question will remain open for discussion. This text would fit well in an undergraduate or seminary-level course on the history of ancient Israel, especially in combination with one of the many “minimalist” scholars with whom Kitchen disagrees so robustly. Furthermore, this text will serve another generation of conservative Bible students for whom Kitchen remains an influential elder statesman.