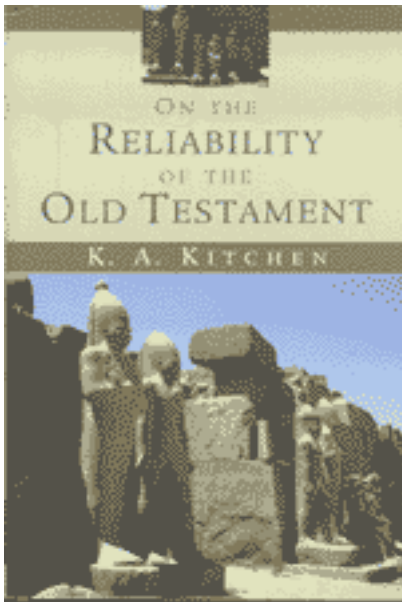


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Kitchen, K. A.

On the Reliability of the Old Testament

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pp. xxii + 662.
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In the mass of books about the Hebrew Bible and its world that appear each year, there are a select number of volumes that command attention. Kenneth Kitchen's volume is certainly one of these. Whether one agrees or disagrees with Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* is a tour de force that must be contended with by those who hold scholarly views on the historical value of these texts.

With historical reliability of the documents the core issue, one might wonder why the title lacks reference to history. Perhaps because the idea for the volume emerges from a conversation many years ago regarding F. F. Bruce's *Are the New Testament Documents Reliable?* in which I. Howard Marshall suggested that Kitchen publish a comparable volume on the Old Testament. So after a distinguished career as a specialist in the texts of the ancient Near East as well as biblical text, Kitchen weighs in with his considered arguments. He sets his agenda clearly in the preface: "Absolute truth in any deep philosophical sense is not the concern of this book, and thus will not be discussed. But individual absolute truths in the shape of objective fact, 'hard facts' that exist independently of what any human being may choose or wish to think—these abound around us in their hundreds of thousands in everyday life, and (quite simply) cannot be gainsaid or wished away" (xiv).

As the greatest amount of available evidence from nonbiblical sources relevant to the task derives from the period of the divided monarchy, Kitchen chooses this spot to begin his examination. After sorting through the evidence he concludes that “the basic presentation of almost 350 years of the story of the Hebrew twin kingdoms comes out under *factual* examination as a highly reliable one, with mention of own and foreign rulers who were real, in the right order, at the right date, and sharing a common history that usually dovetails together well, when both Hebrew and external sources are available” (64, emphasis original). His method tests a basic observation that the narratives in Kings and Chronicles need to be treated on the same terms as all other ancient documents and concludes that when this is done the documents demonstrate credibility.

Kitchen moves next to the period of the exile as also well served in terms of external checks and arrives at a similar conclusion: “We are in a clearly defined historical and cultural period with good mutual correlations” (79). Having established his argument for the reliability of the biblical witness through these most fully documented periods, attention is now turned to the united kingdom. A major concern raised by those who question the size and scope of the kingdom established by Saul and the biblical account of its rise to an empire under David and Solomon—or even its very existence—has been the lack of any attestation of these states in Assyrian and Egyptian texts. In the case of Assyrian archives, the lack of explicit reference to Israel is paralleled by silence concerning all the small emerging empires in the Levant. This is not surprising, the author concludes, given that “no Assyrian rulers had direct contact with Palestine before 853” (156). Turning to the Egyptian texts available, we are not much further ahead, as the only two texts that might be helpful are literary and thus not concerned with political affairs in the area. But, the author insists, this does not mean there is no evidence outside of the biblical texts, for we know that analogous “mini-empires” appeared in the region at about the same time as the rise of Israel is attested in the Bible, that archaeological evidence consistent with biblical traditions can be argued, and that the Mesha and Tel Dan inscriptions provide evidence of “the house of David” about a century and a half after the biblical documentation claims David as dynastic founder. As might be expected, the authenticity of these inscriptions has been challenged by those who argue the kingdom of David and Solomon is a fantasy, but Kitchen presents a case for their genuineness.

As he moves back in time to consider the historicity of Moses, the exodus, the entry into Canaan, and traditions about the patriarchs and prehistory, Kitchen is lucid, engaging, and frequently entertaining in his analysis of an array of materials that are both challenging and contested. He contends that the evidence of Joshua has been typically misread as a sweeping narrative of conquest and control rather than as the picture of military strikes and retreat to limited secure holdings represented by a careful reading of

the text. Judges likewise needs to be read correctly, which includes a larger reassessment of the so-called Deuteronomistic History. The materials in the early chapters of Genesis have been read with expectations that are unrealistic rather than in comparison with the early Mesopotamian compositions they most resemble, and so forth. While his arguments are unlikely to convince even sympathetic readers on every point, he has provided a great resource to all those desiring to think through their own positions and face assumptions and reconstructions of evidence on the basis of cold hard facts. But this is clearly not for the uninitiated. The demands placed on the reader are high. In particular, the methodological approach, which for the most part works backward, could easily lose those whose familiarity with the chronology of the materials is lacking.

Delightfully polemical in spots, Kitchen challenges sloppy thinking, absent evidence, and assumptions that cannot be proved in an attempt to find what is solid and verifiable. Having said this, at times many readers will find his trenchant critique “over the top.” Still, Kitchen has done his homework, whether he is arguing biblical, Egyptological, or ancient Near Eastern materials. He is well aware that his views will elicit a response, in particular from those whose extreme minimalist views of Israelite and Judean history he most vehemently attacks. The final chapter drifts furthest from the question of the historical reliability so ably argued in the bulk of the book to provide a history of minimalism and its philosophical underpinnings. Kitchen dismisses the minimalist camp, concluding with a lament “over the sad history of Old Testament scholarship in the last two hundred years” (497) and issuing a call to cast off “imaginary and outdated evolutionary schemes and give them a decent and final burial” (499).

Throughout his work the author argues that historical scholarship should deal with facts, not hypothetical reconstructions that regard biblical traditions with a level of suspicion not applied to other ancient literary sources. Kitchen’s appeal is to assume the accuracy of the biblical text, to apply the same methodological procedures used in reading comparable materials from other ancient cultures to the reading of biblical text, and to let the facts speak for themselves. After assembling and presenting his evidence, Kitchen concludes that, rather than originating as late as 400–200 B.C. as a largely fictional work, an extreme minimalist position, the biblical texts can be better understood as deriving from the world they represent circa 2000–400 B.C. Overall, the work is a breath of fresh air as a systematic response to sweeping assertions that minimize the integrity of the biblical documents. At the very least, it will be entertaining to watch the responses to the work from those whose views have been attacked.

Subject and scripture indices and fifty figures supplement the tables provided throughout the book, with notations in the text directing the reader to the figures when appropriate. While no bibliography is provided, the work is thoroughly documented by one hundred

pages of endnotes that provide ample references to the literature on point after point and direct the reader to the technical literature discussing each topic

While the inspiration that led to this volume may be Bruce's book first published in 1943, the earlier volume was in both size and scope much simpler for the general reader—the notes in this volume are about the size of Bruce's volume. The average literate churchgoer could plow his or her way through Bruce's compact volume without too much difficulty, but Kitchen's book will prove to be a stretch for many who work more seriously with the biblical text, especially for those whose training does not include ancient Near Eastern history and literature. This is not a criticism of the fine volume produced by Kitchen but is reflective of the distinct differences arising in addressing the same issue in these two distinct but closely related parts of what is for Christians one Bible.