A reliable historical record

A review of
On the Reliability of the Old Testament
by Kenneth A. Kitchen
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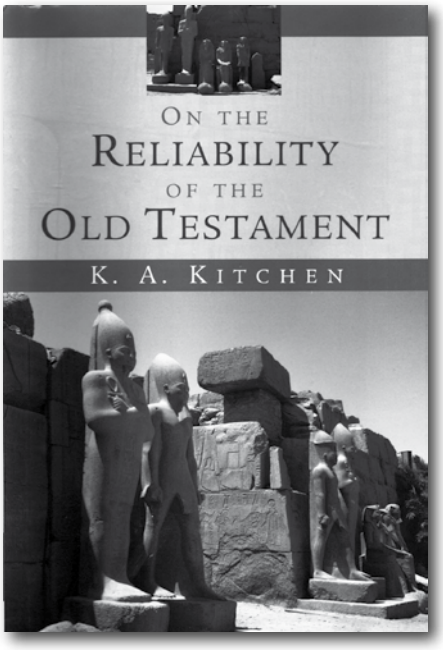

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Kenneth A. Kitchen is professor emeritus of Egyptology at England's University of Liverpool. Inspired by his friend, New Testament scholar I. Howard Marshall, and the late F.F. Bruce's book *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, Kitchen sets out on the imposing task of producing a similar volume for the Old Testament. However, very few scholars in the world today—of any persuasion—have the firsthand knowledge and are as conversant with the primary sources as Kitchen. Few scholars are as widely read or have done such thorough research. The result is, for a searching or unbiased reader, a virtually irrefutable case for the historical reliability of the Old Testament.

Writing style

Kitchen rejects the modern and postmodern ideas of interpretation, preferring a more traditional approach. He repeatedly complains that liberal theories and methods ignore or distort the actual evidence from ancient texts, and those who entertain or espouse such ideas incur the full extent of his verbal wrath. Kitchen savagely attacks radical liberals who dismiss the Old Testament as mostly fictional. Therefore, his style of writing can be quite acerbic and borders on *ad hominem* at times. Polemical expressions such as 'wilful evasion of very clear evidence,' 'without a particle of foundation in fact', 'palpably false', 'totally misleading', 'trendy nonsense', 'self-delusion', 'sloppy scholarship', 'immense ignorance', 'agenda-driven drivel', 'pure, unadulterated fantasy', 'lunacy' and 'crude anti-biblical (almost anti-Semitic) propaganda' can be found dotted throughout the book.

Methodology

Kitchen makes it clear in the introduction that he has limited his discussions to matters of history, literature and culture. He deliberately avoids theological debates, and matters of doctrine and dogma. Obviously the nature of the documents has some bearing on these issues and *vice versa*, but they are not the focus of the book.

Doubters and sceptics often rely heavily upon 'negative evidence'—the lack of ancient remains and non-biblical texts which would absolutely prove the biblical accounts. However, Kitchen rightly points out that this 'proves absolutely nothing' except that ancient artefacts from thousands of years ago have not been preserved. In archaeology, arguments from silence are meaningless given that so much is missing. Apart from the biblical text, historians and archaeologists start with a clean slate, and every discovery is like a piece in a jigsaw puzzle. Just because certain pieces cannot be located at this point in time does not mean that they do not exist or that they never existed.

The book contains ten chapters—the first being the introduction and the last being a summary. The remaining chapters deal with seven epochs of Old Testament history and are arranged in *reverse chronological order* such that the most recent and reliable evidence is dealt with first.

Chapter overviews

In chapter two, Kitchen examines the Divided Monarchy. He catalogues all the references to foreign rulers in the books of Kings and Chronicles and then, after examining all the primary sources, discusses all the references to rulers of Israel and Judah from outside the Bible. Kitchen shows that where comparative evidence from Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Aram and Phoenicia exists, it is remarkably consistent with the names and sequences of rulers listed in the Bible. He concludes that the three and a half centuries covered by the divided monarchy can be correlated with external written and archaeological sources and provide a reliable account.

Chapter three deals with the exilic and postexilic periods of the Old Testament. Kitchen observes that the biblical accounts of the line of the Persian kings correlate with what is known of them from other sources.

Chapter four discusses the epoch of the United Monarchy. Kitchen argues that the period of Saul, David, and Solomon was a time when Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia were all occupied with internal concerns and left no records of international contacts. There are no Aramean inscriptions that date this early. Phoenician and Luvian inscriptions from Syria and Turkey, are almost entirely concerned with their own internal affairs. There are virtually no monumental inscriptions from Palestine in this period or later during the Monarchy. The only existing historical monumental texts

from the entire Monarchy are the Ekron inscription, the Mesha stela, the small Ammonite texts and fragments, and the Tel Dan stela. These are all that remain from Philistia, Moab, Ammon, and southern Aram (with nothing from Edom). Nevertheless, Kitchen locates the personal name of David in the dynastic references to 'the house of David' as found on the Tel Dan and Mesha inscriptions. He also finds the name in the place name 'the heights of Dwt' on the Egyptian itinerary of Shoshenq I from 925 BC. Citing examples where an Egyptian 't' transcribed a Semitic 'd' in various proper names, as well as other Asiatic 'David's' (e.g. *Twti* and *Tt-w't*), and along with a sixth century Ethiopic rendering of King David in the same manner (*Dwt*), Kitchen argues convincingly for the south Judean tenth century place name, 'the heights of David', as the earliest extrabiblical reference to the King David.

Kitchen also considers a number of subjects related to the biblical texts that describe the United Monarchy, and the identity of the pharaoh (Siamun) who conquered Gezer and gave it to Solomon as part of an alliance (pp. 107–112). He also examines Hiram and Phoenician trade (pp. 112–115), the queen of Sheba and trade in gold and spices from Southern Arabia and east Africa (pp. 115–120), and the Temple of Solomon with its 105 feet by 30 feet dimensions and its similarities (three levels of storerooms around three sides of the building, two columns in a portico, and a most holy place within) to temples of Hittites and Egyptians from the second millennium BC, as well as the important contemporary Syrian site of 'Ain Dara (pp. 122–127). Regarding the temple, the details—such as three courses of stone, followed by one of timber, and wood panelling in the inner walls, gold plating and decorations, and various implements (1 Kings 6:18–36)—all have parallels in the Bronze and Iron Ages. The same is true of other public buildings, and also of administration procedures, and various cultural aspects of Solomon's kingdom as recorded in the books of Kings and Chronicles.

In chapter five, Kitchen denies that the book of Joshua purports to describe a complete conquest. He urges readers to observe closely what the Bible actually says, and points out that the Bible itself reports that the Israelites only gradually infiltrated the Promised Land. He notes that only Hazor was burned among the towns of the hill country, and that Israel remained centred at Gilgal throughout the battles in Joshua 1–12 (pp. 162–163) and simply raided other towns.

The sites mentioned in the conquest of Joshua are each examined for their archaeological remains. Of special interest are Jericho and Ai since the archaeological data offers comparatively little corroborative evidence to the biblical text. The former's destruction was followed by four centuries of absence of occupation that eroded almost everything from that period (p. 187) thus the lack of corroborative evidence should not be surprising. In regard to Ai, Kitchen offers a variety of possible explanations for the absence of evidence in the excavations of the site, including the view that Ai may actually be located elsewhere (pp. 188–189).

Kitchen affirms that the book of Judges does not present an alternative view to the same events that occurred in Joshua. Instead, it describes 'attempts at forcing takeovers, plus settling in next to locals, soon after Joshua' (p. 224). Kitchen notes the selective nature of the book of Judges and sees an overlap in the periods of rule for the different judges. He compares this with examples from Mesopotamia and especially Egypt (p. 204). Kitchen finds a similar theological cycle as that of the judges (apostasy, punishment, oppression, repentance, deliverance) in contemporary Egyptian votive inscriptions on stelae (p. 217). In addition, the chronological chart of the judges on page 210 is very helpful.

Chapter six deals with the period of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings. Kitchen rightly objects to those who doubt the historicity of the exodus because of the lack of evidence. This is the logical fallacy of argument from silence. Firstly,

> 'why on earth invent such a tale about such humiliating origins? Nobody else in Near Eastern antiquity descended to that kind of tale of community beginnings' (p. 245).

Secondly, he notes that the question of the absence of Egyptian archaeological and written evidence about the exodus can best be answered by a professional Egyptologist (p. 246; cf. p. 311):

> '... the mud hovels of brickfield slaves and humble cultivators have long since gone back to their mud origins, never to be seen again. Even stone structures (such as temples) hardly survive, in striking contrast to sites in the cliff-enclosed valley of Upper Egypt to the south.'
>
> Furthermore,
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> '... practically no written records of any extent have been retrieved from Delta sites reduced to brick mounds … a tiny fraction (of late date) have been found carbonized (burned) … A tiny fraction of reports from the East Delta occur in papyri recovered from the desert near Memphis. Otherwise, the entirety of Egypt's administrative records at all periods in the Delta is lost … and monumental texts are also nearly nil.'

In addition, he points out that 'pharaohs *never* monumentalise defeats on temple walls', so why would we expect to find a record in the Delta or anywhere else of 'the successful exit of a large bunch of foreign slaves (with loss of a full chariot squadron)[?]' (p. 246).

Despite there being no external witnesses to the exodus or any of the other specific events described in the early accounts of the Bible, there is still much that can be said. Kitchen demonstrates that the events and descriptions—in relation to both incidental and major points—correspond time and time again to the actual remains and the written record contemporary with the supposed

time of these events. Kitchen cites many ancient parallels to the kinds of activities mentioned in the biblical record, including customs, travel and trade routes, and the topography of the region. In fact, there are some items (e.g. the Tabernacle and the covenant structure in the Pentateuch) which can only reasonably be dated to this time.

The patriarchs are dealt with in chapter seven. Kitchen's observes that the itinerary of Shishak I dating to 925 BC names a place in the biblical Negev as 'The Enclosure of Abram' (p. 313), and therefore appears to be an attestation to the biblical Abram/Abraham. There are other interpretations of this inscription but none fit the region like the biblical patriarch who roamed the Negev (Genesis 12).

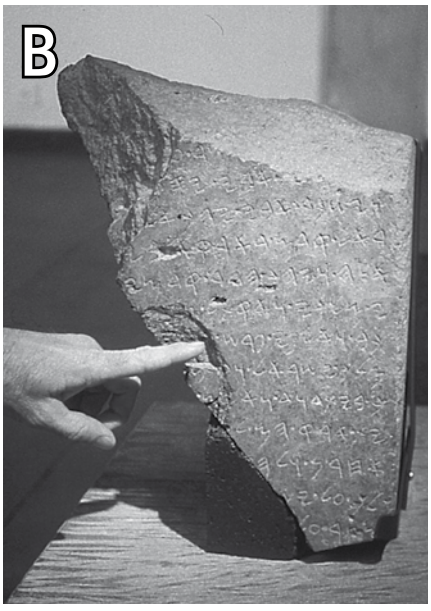
Patriarchal marriage customs and monotheism are found to reach back into the early second millennium. Even many of the details of Jacob's years spent working for Laban have parallels in the Old Babylonian laws of Hammurabi and the Old Assyrian traditions (pp. 337–338).

Kitchen on Genesis, Creation, and the Flood

Of particular interest is chapter nine which examines historical reliability of Genesis 1–11. In this period, the archaeological data is very sparse and so there is much more room for conjecture. Kitchen begins by considering the Mesopotamian primeval accounts, the Sumerian King List, the Atrahasis Epic, and the Eridu Genesis. He notes that, like Genesis 1–11, all these date from the early second millennium BC and they all have creation (eventually) followed by a flood and a new start. Regarding the Table of Nations (Genesis 10), Kitchen argues that this work, which began in the early second millennium, was updated in the first millennium.

Kitchen rightly points out that the Genesis creation account has very little in common with the other ancient accounts. Creation is the central theme of Genesis 1–2 but in *Enuma Elish*, the creation theme is really only a tail piece and its primary purpose was to portray the supremacy of Marduk (p. 424). Indeed, he notes that most Assyriologists have long since rejected the idea of a direct link between Genesis 1–11 and *Enuma Elish*.

Kitchen also rightly affirms the unity of Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, describing the notion of a division at Genesis 2:4a as artificial, and lampoons the liberal literary critics for their fanatical dogmatism. He offers several pieces of literary evidence to prove this unity, and labels any attempt to break the verse up as 'literary



Photos by David Down www.archaeologicaldiggings.com

The epoch of the United Monarchy—the period of Saul, David and Solomon—was a time when Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia were all occupied with internal concerns and left no records of international contacts. Nevertheless, Kitchen discovered the name of David inscribed in **(A)** the Dan Stela, **(B)** the Mesha stela (Moabite Stone) and **(C)** the Shoshenq I relief at Karnak, some of the very few existing historical monumental texts from the entire Monarchy.

vandalism' (p. 428). Of course, his observations and criticisms are also applicable to young-earth creationists who hold to a strict tablet theory which sees the *toledot* divisions as marking the beginning and ending of separate 'tablets'. Rather they are a deliberate literary construction by the author/editor for the purpose of conveying the historical foundation of the Judeo-Christian worldview, introducing the results of a previous section in the narrative as the subject of the next.

Regarding the Flood, Kitchen declines to comment on its extent but highlights that the Sumerians and Babylonians had no doubt about its historicity and extraordinary destructiveness given that it features prominently in their earliest historical traditions (pp. 425–426). It is clear though that Kitchen does not believe it altered the earth's surface to any great extent given that he tries in vain to locate the missing rivers of Eden, the Gihon and Pishon. Indeed, he accepts the old-earth timescales of millions of years (p. 430). This should not be surprising given that Kitchen is writing within the British evangelical context and tradition, the members of which have long given up biblical authority in matters of history in favour of long-age compromises, with disastrous consequences.[1] This tradition is reluctant to appeal explicitly to God's direct intervention, preferring instead to see God working indirectly through natural events and processes.

Responses to critics

The concluding chapter reviews the evidence previously presented and critiques the arguments of some of the recent critical assessments of biblical history, including those of T.L. Thompson, N.P. Lemche, I. Finkelstein and N. Silberman, J.H. Hayes, J.M. Miller and others. In each case, he identifies specific errors of fact according to the evidence that presently exists.

In addition, Kitchen makes some interesting critical reflections on the *Zeitgeist* of each period of critical study on the ancient near east and the manner in which this influenced the presumptions of those involved. For example, Kitchen includes a fascinating review of *deconstructionism* as applied to historical studies at the present time. A student of biblical history would be wise to heed Kitchen's warnings and examine and reflect on his observations, especially the specific discussions of errors in the evidence itself and the way in which critical scholars have sometimes reported this evidence. One such example is the data relating to the raid on Moab by Ramesses II (pp. 481–482).

The verdict

Following the final chapter is one hundred pages of endnotes, forty plates of maps, drawings, and charts, and subject and Scripture indexes. The grouping of endnotes for each chapter at the end of the book is particularly awkward and annoying, especially for those who want to follow up on certain issues or pursue further reading.

Although Kitchen goes to great lengths to justify and defend the biblical record against the liberal minimalists and biblio-sceptics, on some occasions he unfortunately stops far short of proclaiming a strict inerrant correlation between the text we have today and actual history. As noted above, Kitchen is reluctant to resort to miracles in his explanations, which appears to be a deliberate attempt to show that the record can stand up to scrutiny on its own. Sometimes, however, he lets the archaeological evidence take priority over the text. For example, he has King Saul reigning for 32 rather than 40 years. The 40 years of peace in the days of Gideon (Judges 8:28) are a round figure closer to 30 years. (So if it was closer to thirty then why did the author not round it off to 'thirty years'?) See also his discussion of the life spans of antediluvians (p. 446), the nature of the Exodus plagues (pp. 249f), and crossing of red sea (pp. 254f). Nevertheless, despite these few failings, Kitchen deserves the gratitude of every student of the Bible for such a remarkably thorough well-researched historical defence of the Old Testament. He has devoted his life to the study of the history and culture of ancient Egypt and the ancient Near East and this certainly shows in his knowledge and handling of the data. There are few scholars who have his depth of knowledge of, and breadth of experience with, the primary sources. Moreover, much of Kitchen's work represents materials that he himself has examined firsthand and been the first to recognise and publish their relationship to Israel's history.

Because this book assumes a certain amount knowledge and familiarity of history, archaeology, language, culture and biblical studies, this is primarily a book for scholars and well-read students of the Bible. However, anyone with a reasonable level of education will glean much useful information from this work. For those who are looking for an answer to the question, 'Can we trust the reliability of the Bible?', this is must reading. Kitchen provides the reader with the most thoroughly researched and comprehensive collection of relevant ancient Near Eastern material available for the establishment of Old Testament history within its original and authentic world.

In terms of 'general reliability', Kitchen concludes that the Old Testament

> 'comes out remarkably well, so long as its writings and writers are treated fairly and evenhandedly, in line with independent data, open to all'.

I would add that if the Old Testament is such an accurate and reliable history of the Hebrew people, then it should also be regarded as an accurate and reliable history of the creation of the universe and the creation of man.

References

1. Mortenson, T., *The Great Turning Point*, New Leaf Press, Green Forest, AR, 2004.