

On the Reliability of the Old Testament by Kenneth A. Kitchen. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. Pp. 662. \$45.00 hardcover.

In this monumentally significant and comprehensive work, Kitchen—a specialist in Egyptology, archaeology, and the history and literature of western Asia—in an engagingly feisty and no-nonsense style, provides a step-by-step, point-by-point examination of the reliability of the Old Testament on the basis of the cold hard facts of historical evidence without regard to current “philosophical cranks (politically correct, postmodernist, or whatever else)” (xiv). The basic question before the court is simply: Are the Old Testament writings, in whole or in part, presenting us with genuine information from within 2000-400 B.C.? Thus, Kitchen is at pains to deal with “history, literature, [and] culture, *not* with theology, doctrine, or dogma” (3).

Kitchen begins his adjudication with an examination of the data from the period of the divided monarchy. He then continues forward on the timeline to a consideration of the evidence for the biblical accounts of the exile and return before shifting his chronological time machine into reverse (potentially causing reader-whiplash, though in good archaeological fashion) and hearing testimony from historical witnesses regarding the reliability of the Old Testament accounts of the united monarchy, the settlement in Canaan, the sojourn in Egypt, and subsequently the Exodus (for which he, inexplicably, seems compelled to offer explanations for the associated miracles in terms of exclusively natural phenomena—a tack unnecessary for his argument and surrendering too much to the antimiracle crowd). Next, he moves to the patriarchs, and, after a brief treatment of the phenomena of prophets and prophecy, the primeval proto-history. (This nonchronological approach seems a bit unnecessarily jarring, though he explains this as a logical movement from the period with most historical evidence to that with the least.) For those readers who have not the patience or the time to follow the proceedings in every detail, Kitchen conveniently ends each chapter with a summary or balance sheet, as he calls it, in which he weighs the evidence surveyed for or against biblical reliability.

Kitchen ends the entire book with a fine summary and conclusion of his inquest into the facts of the case, including pointed rebuttals to the loud claims of scholarly detractors new and old. While many pages of helpful illustrations are also provided at the end of the book, these should have been of much better quality for a book of this caliber and would have been of more help had they been exhibited at the appropriate points in the text. This latter, minor objection applies as well to the endnotes.

Kitchen's verdict concerning Old Testament reliability, after carefully weighing the evidence in an amazing breadth and depth of detail, is simply that every aspect of the biblical narrative (e.g., names of places; names of rulers and the sequence of their reigns; itineraries; cultural practices and customs; literary conventions; and international relations, including accounts of wars and their consequences) is corroborated, paralleled, made comprehensible, or (at the very least) demonstrated to be possible by the ancient Near Eastern record. Kitchen's conclusion regarding the biblical account of the period of the united monarchy applies equally well to the historical references of the Bible as a whole: "Such are the facts, which cannot be gainsaid, attested solidly by the entire corpus of firsthand material. To this *all* of us must bow, regardless of prejudice or prior agenda" (135).

With this book, Kitchen has performed an outstanding and lasting service for biblical scholarship. It is a welcome breath of fresh air for all those of us who, in reading scholarly assessments of Old Testament historical accounts, too often have been subjected to the foul winds of doubt, disparagement, or dismissal by those who have not taken the time, as has Kitchen, to examine carefully the full array of available archaeological and textual data. This book is a must-read and/or buy for anyone who harbors doubts about the reliability of the Old Testament, needs to present a cogent case to naysayers from without, or requires facts at hand to reassure a questioning parishioner who has been unsettled by a challenge to the accuracy or historicity of the biblical record. There is something to be learned on virtually every page. I must caution, however, that Kitchen's book will certainly not be welcomed by everyone. To those ideologues, for example, who argue that historical references in the Bible are unreliable (in order to cook up some interpretive concoction that suits their own tastes) I say, "If you can't stand the heat of careful, objective analysis, stay clear of Kitchen!"

—Michael J. Williams