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**Abstract** Review of *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (2003), by Kenneth A. Kitchen.

# THE OLD TESTAMENT AS RELIABLE HISTORY

John Gee

**K**enneth A. Kitchen is a distinguished scholar of the ancient Near East.<sup>1</sup> He has probably published more Egyptian texts than any living Egyptologist.<sup>2</sup> His discussion of the Third Intermediate Period is both absolutely basic and absolutely indispensable.<sup>3</sup> He has also dealt in detail with the Hittites and Assyrians.<sup>4</sup> He is the first to organize and place the Epigraphic South Arabic material into a

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1. 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.

2. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical*, 8 vols. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975–90); Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions, Translated and Annotated, Translations*, 4 vols. to date (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993–2003); Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions, Translated and Annotated, Notes and Comments*, 3 vols. to date (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992–2003).

3. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *The Third Intermediate Period in Egypt (1100–650 BC)* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1973; 2nd ed., 1986; rev. 2nd ed., 1996).

4. Among others, Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Suppiluliuma and the Amarna Pharaohs: A Study in Relative Chronology* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1962); Kitchen, “Egypt, the Levant and Assyria in 701 BC,” in *Fontes atque Pontes* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1983), 243–53.

Review of Kenneth A. Kitchen. *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003. xxii + 662 pp., with subject and scripture indexes. \$45.00.

coherent picture.<sup>5</sup> He has dealt with such diverse topics as chronology, poetry, and the kings of Byblos.<sup>6</sup> He is comfortable with both the minute details and the big picture. He is a first-rate ancient historian. He is also a believing Christian. His book *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* is essential reading for anyone interested in the historicity of the Old Testament. It is the best book on Old Testament history that I have seen to date.

Kitchen's book, however, is not a narrative history of the Old Testament period. It is a long, detailed argument for the reliability of the Old Testament, which is impressive in sweep and scope, care and meticulous detail. Although Kitchen's prose is lively, trenchant, and insightful, Kitchen's book is not necessarily an easy read. It is easier to read when you see the big picture of his argument, which is much clearer in outline form. Unfortunately, the publisher did not include in the table of contents the detailed outline Kitchen used throughout the book. The volume is capped with one hundred pages of notes and forty plates of illustrated figures, most of which are hand drawn by Kitchen himself.

Kitchen's volume systematically supports the historicity of the Old Testament narratives, including an argument that Genesis 1–11 can only have been composed before Abraham. He views it as reliable history with limitations. Given that Kitchen is a rather prominent evangelical scholar, who might, therefore, be expected to have typical evangelical views on biblical infallibility, it is significant that his book is on the reliability of the Old Testament rather than on its infallibility.

Kitchen's method couples a careful reading of the text with the use of relevant archaeological, typological, and inscriptional material. Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of Kitchen's scholarship

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5. Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Documentation for Ancient Arabia*, 2 vols. to date (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1994–2000).

6. For example, Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Chronology of Ancient Egypt," *World Archaeology* 23/2 (1991): 201–8; Kitchen, "Ancient Egyptian Chronology for Aegeanists," *Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* 2/2 (2002): 5–12; Kitchen, *Poetry of Ancient Egypt* (Jonsered: Aströms, 1999); Kitchen, "Byblos, Egypt, and Mari in the Early Second Millennium BC," *Orientalia*, n.s., 36 (1967): 39–54.

is that his way of arguing for the historicity of the Bible is of the same sort as has been typically employed by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies to argue for the historicity of the Book of Mormon. This is really not surprising since they are the same methods one would have to use to argue for the historicity of any ancient text, whether it be the works of Tacitus, Tudhaliya, or Tuthmosis; Sennacherib, Suetonius, or Sinuhe; or Hattusilis, Herodotus, or Hammurabi. Kitchen cannot be faulted for his method or his evidence; those who have sought to discredit him have criticized him for his beliefs, his field of specialty, or his style of prose.

Although I enjoyed Kitchen's vigorous and forceful prose, an acquaintance of mine told me that he did not like Kitchen's book because of its tone. There is perhaps some truth to this accusation directed at Kitchen. He does at one point refer to an argument as "absolute bunkum!" (p. 470). A few examples of Kitchen's prose might suffice to illustrate the extreme end of his tone:

Yes, an uncomfortably large proportion of old books, theses, and papers on (e.g.) endless variants of literary-critical theories of the composition of the books of the Old Testament could be profitably pulped and recycled. . . . Down to the present time, biblical studies journals still carry overmuch of these gossamer speculations (unsullied by objective data) that real professional scholars of Near Eastern texts and material cultures could easily dispense with. (p. 459)

Scholars who would cavalierly dismiss such references are out of touch with the usage of three millennia (from the Palermo Stone to the Seleucid Babylonian chronicles), and thus go badly astray in their assessments of the origin and nature of the contents of Kings and Chronicles. (p. 63)

Let that fact sink in; Wellhausen's arrogant dismissal of the list is wholly without any factual foundation whatsoever. And what is true of this item is true of most of the rest of his work. (pp. 496–97)

We today *do* have the vast resources hinted at just above. And they *do* enable us to profile ancient history accurately in its broad sweep. And straight bottom-to-top evolution is *out*. It *never* happened like that; no, not ever. (p. 487, emphasis in original)

And so one could go on and on. But this tiny handful of examples of (anti)academic lunacy will suffice. If the English departments that started off all this nonsense can find nothing better to do than this drivel, then we would be much better off without them. And their resources would be freed up for people with something worthwhile to offer their fellow humans. The only worthwhile thing one can really do with claptrap deconstruction is . . . to deconstruct it. (pp. 471–72, ellipses in original)

[J. M.] Miller's claim was, and remains, an entirely irresponsible misstatement of the real facts, and still needs to be publicly withdrawn in print. It is not acceptable that a tyro, totally unqualified in reading hieroglyphic texts, should so accuse a long-experienced epigrapher, merely to prop up some pet a priori prejudices about the Old Testament text. . . . This was a shabby way to treat important firsthand evidence, and those who go to some trouble to provide it, ultimately for the public good. (pp. 481–82)

In spite of this hard-hitting rhetoric, it is seriously the best book on the historicity of the Old Testament currently in print and probably will remain so for the foreseeable future. Potential readers who brush aside the book because of its tone use this issue as an excuse to avoid substantive arguments. Kitchen invariably confronts his opponents' arguments, though occasionally he takes the argument further by claiming that extensive use of shoddy arguments might say something about their authors. Kitchen's treatment of William G. Dever, with whom he sometimes agrees and sometimes disagrees, and whom he characterizes as "firm rock and sinking sand" (pp. 468–69), is more typical. Ironically, those who dismiss the arguments because of tone,

claiming that bad tone is a form of the ad hominem fallacy, are themselves engaging in the very fallacy they decry.

One of the issues at stake over tone is how well such tone is communicated through the written word. Estimates of the ratios of the verbal component in communication vary from about 7 to 35 percent.

Although the value of nonverbal communication is sometimes overstated, the fact remains that nonverbal information is an important cue to the speaker's meaning, particularly when the literal content of the message is ambiguous. After all, the same statement can, depending on tone, emphasis, and expression, be either sarcastic or serious, disrespectful or deferential, sanguine or somber.<sup>7</sup>

Studies show that "participants overestimated their ability to communicate" in writing and "this was true regardless of whether participants were trying to communicate sarcasm, humor, or some other emotion or tone, and regardless of whether participants were free to craft their own communication or were constrained by the experimenter."<sup>8</sup> The same studies also show, however, that not only are people poor in judging the tone of their own writing, but they also significantly overestimate their ability to correctly determine the tone of the written communication of others.<sup>9</sup> These studies indicate that readers frequently misinterpret the tone of what they read; therefore, complaints about someone's tone should take these facts into account. Those who complain about the tone of a work are likely misinterpreting it, perhaps intentionally.

It is inevitable that specialists in a field will not see eye to eye on every topic. Although I agree with Kitchen in most things, I disagree with him on a couple of minor points. I will mention only one: the location of Ur (see p. 316). Equating Ur with Tell el-Muqayyar rests on exceedingly slender foundations. In fact, a careful reading of the text

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7. Justin Kruger, et. al, "Egocentrism over E-mail: Can We Communicate as Well as We Think?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89/6 (2005): 926 (references omitted).

8. Kruger et al., "Egocentrism over E-mail," 933.

9. Kruger et al., "Egocentrism over E-mail," 931.

shows that it is impossible. In Genesis 24:4, Abraham sends his servant back to his native land (*môladti*), which turns out to be Aram-Naharaim in the north (Genesis 24:10; the KJV translation of “Mesopotamia” is in error). This excludes the possibility of a southern Ur.

A more serious problem is that some of the evidence that Kitchen has brought forward is now charged with being forged. Currently an Israeli court case is still pending, and it would be best to wait until the court has decided which, if any, of the alleged forgeries are actually forged. The use of some artifacts that have been generally accepted as genuine in a book published before they were charged as forgeries is not Kitchen’s fault, and if reference to them is removed, the impact on his argument is small; Kitchen has cast his net so broadly and deeply that the loss of a few pieces is not critical. Kitchen has argued from both external and internal evidences of the text and from sources both outside and inside of ancient Israel. The alleged forgeries were items from the antiquities market that were not found on archaeological excavations. The items being examined include the Jehoash inscription, the ivory pomegranate, and various seals and bullae, although most of them are not included in Kitchen’s work. When the dust settles, it will be worthwhile to go through Kitchen’s book and note the places where the evidence he uses turns out to be forged.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I highly recommend it. I wish I had written it.