

**A Review of Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.'s
*The Old Testament Documents: Are They Reliable and Relevant?***

By Michael R. Jones

After reading this book, this reviewer was amazed that he had not stumbled across it before. As Kaiser points out in his preface (p. 10), this book seeks to do for the Old Testament what F. F. Bruce's book *The New Testament Documents: Are they Reliable?* did for New Testament studies. Kaiser, in this reviewer's opinion, succeeds, and even surpasses this goal. Kaiser reminds the reader that with the Old Testament the question of reliability is not the only question to be answered, the question of relevance must also be answered (p. 10). To that end, this book, and anyone who handles the Old Testament text, must deal with more than mere historical and archeological information, but must provide an answer to the question, "So what?"

Kaiser's method for answering these questions in the affirmative is straightforward and simple. He addresses first the question of the reliability of the canon and text of the Old Testament by examining its origin in terms of divine inspiration and providential preservation along with the question of ancient sources detailed within the books themselves. Kaiser reminds the reader that the Old Testament must be innocent until proven guilty and so cannot be casually dismissed without proper examination. The process of canon formation, the details of which are admittedly sketchy, receives its due here in a brief but comprehensive explanation of how and why certain books were accepted as authoritative and the historical evidence for the divisions of the canon and their acceptance by ancient groups. Kaiser goes on to explain how the text was preserved, especially through the work of the Masoretes, and verified by comparison with the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The bulk of the book deals with the question of reliability with regard to the history and the message of the text. In this section, Kaiser devotes an entire chapter to the question of archeology and its help for determining the reliability of the text, his conclusion is that it does and that it is "uncanny" (p. 108) in its confirmation of the text to the extent that one should accept the text until "definite contrary information is available" (p. 108). There is also a chapter devoted to the chronologies of the kings of Israel and Judah in which Kaiser concludes that the chronologies of the kings are accurate when they can be verified with external sources. The postmodern "hermeneutic of suspicion" (p. 128) and focus on philology produces more questions than it answers without providing any good reason for being mistrustful in the first place.

Part three, which deals with the reliability of the message of the Old Testament, was intriguing, but probably not the most exciting for the average reader. This section deals with the Pentateuch by examining the documentary hypothesis, the wisdom books by providing a mini-biblical theology of wisdom, and the prophetic writings by examining words, allusions, and metaphors used by the prophets Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel. There is, sadly, only a brief section on messianic prophecy, but it is intriguing enough, perhaps, to prompt one to further study. While this reviewer will admit to a disturbing fascination for all things relating to the documentary hypothesis, even he found this section a little tedious at times and concludes that an untrained layman would either be fascinated or bored by it. Much of the information is necessary in an examination of these issues, though, considering his intended audience (p. 10) and could not properly be passed over or dealt with in any more brevity.

The final section is perhaps the most exciting of the whole book, as if it has all built up to this. The question of relevance for Old Testament narrative, the Torah, wisdom literature, and the prophets is addressed, each in their own chapter. These chapters were beneficial not only for the

information and for the grounding they provide in how to apply the text (and why it should be applied) but also provide examples of how to do it. For example the chapter on Torah, explains the meaning of “Torah.” Torah is not mere “law” in the sense of mere rules or binding ordinances; it is the pointing out of the way to go (p. 184) and so guides the follower of YHWH and attests to the reality of God in the everyday lives of the people (p. 185).

This section of the book, coupled with another book, perhaps Kaiser’s own *Toward an Exegetical Theology*, would greatly help a minister, seminary student, or even a well-versed layman, in handling the text appropriately and meaningfully. The other two chapters in this section also further one’s understanding about how to proclaim and apply the Old Testament Scriptures.

The epilogue is a fitting end to this book, in which Kaiser reminds the reader of what this is ultimately all about. The Old Testament does not stand alone but is part of the whole of Scripture. To plumb its depths one must avoid allegorizing, moralizing, and scattershot interpretation. He concludes by looking to Jesus’ words in Luke 24 and derives several propositions that give focus and guidance to the interpreter of the Old Testament.

This book is outstanding and it certainly fills a void in this area of study. It would serve as a fine introduction to the subject or as a refresher for those who have not thought about these topics in a while. It is hard to find fault with Kaiser’s work, but this reviewer, in addition to minor things mentioned during the course of this review, found himself wishing that there was a similar textbook that covered the same topics but in more simplified form for laypersons who knew little or nothing about these topics. One certainly would not want to be without this book, which Kaiser describes as being for the layperson student, and professional scholar (p. 10), but digressions about Urtexts (p. 46) and references to Ebionism vs. Docetism (p. 182) might very well deter the average reader. Such digressions contribute to the understanding of the subject only for the person with some reading or training behind him. In all fairness, however, one with little background could simply skim over the sections mentioned above and lose little.

One wishes, then, not for a book to replace this one, but for a book to go along with it, so that the pastor could recommend to his people a book that covers these topics simply. Such a book could be used to supplement a teaching series or simply to recommend to an inquirer or Christian who desires to know more, but who is unwilling to dive into discussions about Urtexts (p. 46), the meaning of “*bullae*” (p. 161), or the Akkadian word for “cakes” (p. 163).

These are admittedly minor difficulties, however, and despite such problems, even the untrained layman could use this book with much profit. The seminary student, pastor, or anyone committed to the tasks of studying, proclaiming, or defending the Bible will profit even more.