Wes Howard-Brook’s preface hints at one of his book’s goals: he offers “a new and hopeful way of understanding ‘religion’” that has already helped many of his previously disenchanted students to re-engage the Bible as a resource for pursuing “a more just and humane world” (xiv–xv). He elaborates this redefinition in the first chapter, “In the Beginning.” The Bible’s passionate polyvalence concerning “what it means to be ‘God’s people’” (4) asks questions that antecede any claim (whether ancient or postmodern) that God is on one’s “side”; rather, the onus is on us as readers to discover the character and call of this God and to determine what scripture’s voices have to say about the allegiances that bind us. Howard-Brook reclaims the “binding” force of the Latin religio in order to set the bond of covenant with God as creator in polar opposition to a religion of empire, which justifies social inequalities with an imitative claim of divine blessing. This introductory chapter concludes with an outline of the values and criteria of these two competing religions and a sketch of their interaction in biblical history.

The remainder of part 1 addresses the composition of Genesis, set against the later context of exile. For Howard-Brook, Gen 1–36 concerns the teaching of the identity of God’s people, narrated over against the allure of Babylonian culture and its creation myth. Here and elsewhere in the book, the author’s view of ancient empire is synchronic, looking forward from the Babylonian setting to the ways in which other empires would influence
biblical reflections on the image of God. This broadly comparative viewpoint permits Howard-Brook to preview and present series of questions (such as those on exilic theodicy and anthropology, 16) that the canon asks at sporadic intervals. He freely shares his integrative skills, displayed in his presentation of the multiple networks of influence that supported Babylon’s “official” sacred narrative, as well as his wit, as when he explains that tohu vebolu (Gen 1:2) evokes “the mysteriously frightening, as can be experienced by saying it aloud in a spooky voice” (19 n. 17). He also highlights trends for later reference. For instance, Nimrod’s empire-building mode is targeted “from its primal ‘beginning’” through Roman times (45, linking basileia in Gen 10:10 LXX to Roman imperial deployments of the term, a comparison that could have been better nuanced). So too with regard to the theme of empire as a “human-made substitute” (58) for God’s creation: settling there is provisionally approved at the end of Genesis, but rejected by Exodus (89).

Taking the interreligious conflict from “Exodus to Exile,” part 2 questions the canonical story’s “relatively (and deceivingly) simple message” of “conversion” from covenant to imperial ambition (95). This inquiry begins with Solomon’s “wisdom” and advances through the kings and prophets, with associative, backward glances at the prekingship narratives. The reverse-engineering of Pharaoh to resemble the Solomon of 1 Kings is shown with clarity and concern for students who may find such ideas discomfiting. The two-religions theory—which Howard-Brook plans to follow through American history in a later volume (111 n. 31)—finds a significant locus in the question of how Solomon’s kingship relates to that of YHWH: Is his reign distinctive among the nations or little better than Babylon’s imperial theology? This “tug-of-war” shapes compositional and hermeneutical issues, as when Pharaoh’s role in the exodus narrative reads as a cipher for later, oppressive monarchs such as Rehoboam (139, 145). It also applies to theological characterization, for the historical and prophetic texts are divided on whether YHWH should be better understood as present in all of Israel’s shrines or principally in Jerusalem’s “ambit of urban empire” (159). The argument among the prophetic books (e.g., First Isaiah versus Micah, 172–79) reviews the question of the necessity of human kingship in the context of revolutionary hopes, occasionally co-opted or compromised by royal ideologies. A concluding chapter describes how the “Israelite” ethnic identity was “forged through shared resistance to empire, centered on claims of kinship, land, and religion” (205, emphasis original).

Part 3, “From Exile to Easter: Fallen Jerusalem, Fallen Babylon,” searches exilic and postexilic texts for fallout patterns from the Josianic compromise between the Sinai/creational and Zion/royal “religions.” Howard-Brook casts Jeremiah as a projection of the effects of such compromise in a time of international crisis, his letter to the exiles as an anticipation of a “healing transformation of the imperial city” (223) through their witness, and Ezekiel as a contrasting vision in which YHWH’s cosmic role as judge is to be
restored and Jerusalem’s idolatrous/adulterous relationships with other nations rejected. The author then argues that Ezra-Nehemiah’s account of the rebuilding of Jerusalem represents a deal brokered between Israelite and Persian theopolitical elites, a transaction in which YHWH is markedly silent and his authority is exercised (if not usurped) by foreign kings, and to which Haggai and Zechariah register dissenting votes.

After addressing the manner in which Third Isaiah and Leviticus added stronger opinions about ritual purity and inclusion to the concerns above, Howard-Brook turns toward the Hellenistic era. His subjects there span the “official” nature of Malachi’s closure of prophecy, the development of apocalyptic and particularly the “counter-wisdom” of 1 Enoch opposite Ptolemaic rule, and the exilic causality and provocative questions voiced by Daniel: “does the sheer fact of imperial political control mean the end of Israelite identity and loyalty to YHWH?” (340). Both 1 Enoch and Jubilees offer Howard-Brook evidence of disillusionment with the Hasmoneans as yet another manifestation of aristocracy, setting the stage for the messianic hopes of Qumran’s scribes, the Psalms of Solomon, and Enoch’s parables.

The book’s fourth and final part follows the biblical story’s denouement from “Easter to the Eschaton,” foregrounding Jesus’ fulfillment of the creational religion and defeat of the imperial. Howard-Brook has anticipated this moment with express references and by implication; when he says earlier that even Jubilees’ vocational stance against empire “envisions an Israel that is saved while ‘the nations’ are doomed” (362), it is difficult not to think of the contrast between this and Paul’s missional perspective. But as he begins to consider the New Testament, the author pauses to distinguish his approach from fundamentalist and Jesus Seminar interpretations, readings he finds “oddly parallel” in their attempts at objectivism (386). He describes his own hermeneutic as attentive to the canonical form of each book, as opposed to abstracted collections of sayings that fail to reflect “the continuity of Jesus with Israel’s journey” (387). He also accounts for his own Christian discipleship, stating that “the Risen Jesus provides the only reliable hermeneutical key to Christian interpretation of the Bible” (390). In this “resurrection-oriented reading,” YHWH’s missional purposes “would have been obvious were it not for the persistent, powerful presence of the religion of empire claiming YHWH’s authority” (395), one of several points that underscore divine presence and imperial “counter-presence” (396) as resonant, subsurface themes here.

Turning to the New Testament texts themselves, Howard-Brook devotes a chapter to each canonical Gospel, characterizing Mark as a confrontation not just between Jesus and the Jewish and Roman elites but also between conflicting Christologies: the “(false) hope” of the Davidic, kingly messiah on the one hand, and the “counter-story” of the Human One on the other (402). Matthew, Luke-Acts, and John dissociate Jesus and Israel’s God from
empire in similar yet distinctive ways. Among Howard-Brook’s emphases in Paul is the vocation of the *ekklēsiai* in “coming out” of empire, taking up the gospel, and thus embodying the “light to the nations.” The call to “come out” grows louder in Revelation, where courage, faith, and *hypomenē* are requisites for the journey away from the so-called life “packaged and sold by the empire’s marketing teams” (472).

This is a brave, bold, and largely effective attempt at a holistic biblical theology, cutting across the current of working with scripture piecemeal—but absent such voices as Habakkuk, whose shock at YHWH’s deployment of imperial violence is neglected even in the sole reference to his testimony (231 n. 39). Nearly free of typographical errors (with the notable exception of the back cover!), the book is an engaging read. Howard-Brook explains his dialectical categories simply and revisits them frequently enough to make them accessible for readers of any competency; that said, his approach does carry some attendant quandaries, two of which I would draw special attention to if using this book as a course text. The first is the hermeneutical question of discerning the religion of empire from that of creation: the author and/or reader here becomes not just an interpreter of a given text but the final arbiter of its religious alignment. Second, the dialectic prompts the question of which “religion” it is that ultimately governs the shape of the biblical text as a whole. That is, if God’s call is understood consistently to be “out of empire,” then is it not the “religion of empire” that ends up defining the parameters for God’s vocational call, thus dictating much of the theological agenda for the Bible, as well as for the present volume?