“Come Out My People!” is an ambitious work. It is a book that many will find stimulating, controversial, and enlightening. Wes Howard-Brook has undertaken a massive project that obviously is the fruit of many years of study and reflection. It is a global, sweeping overview of the entire Hebrew Bible and New Testament, with insights from several noncanonical traditions to support his thesis. This is a book that both seasoned scholars and interested readers will find challenging and thought-provoking.

This is a book of passion and engagement, and this orientation is one that some will find refreshing and compelling, while others will judge it as an impediment to unbiased scholarship. Howard-Brook states clearly in the preface, “This book is the result of more than two decades of study, reflection and experiments in discipleship” (xv). He offers further methodological musings in chapter 20, the opening essay on his approach to New Testament texts where he states that “the interpretation in this chapter comes out of an openly committed stance of Christian discipleship.” (387) Howard-Brook is a committed and careful reader of texts, and this openness and honesty enhances rather than detracts from his interpretations. His observations combine both the theoretical and practical dimensions of texts, and the reader can engage with his interpretations on the various levels of his or her choice.
Howard-Brook divides his analysis into four sections, corresponding to major periods of Israelite and early Christian history. Genesis is the focus of part 1, “In The Beginning,” where Howard-Brook introduces his overarching thesis that the Bible presents two views of religion: (1) the religion of creation, consisting of the experience of and ongoing relationship with the Creator God, leading to blessing and abundance for all people and all creation; and (2) the religion of empire, which while claiming to be of God is actually a human invention to justify attitudes and behaviors that provide blessing and abundance for some at the expense of others (7). The Genesis texts come together in the period of the Babylonian exile to provide an understanding of why this calamity has occurred. Babylon represents the current manifestation of the apex of human accomplishment, the religion of empire that richly blesses the few while the many ceaselessly toil. Howard-Brook weaves together his interpretations of the Primeval History, Abraham, and Jacob cycle texts to show the consistent call of God to resist imperial social constructs. Thus Genesis is a counternarrative to this imperial worldview of the necessity of violence, the ideological, military, economic, and political power of great cities, and the imperial construction of coercive agricultural and trade networks. The “religion of creation” centers on listening and obeying the voice of God wherever it leads, trusting that it leads to abundance and life, while the “religion of empire” consists of humans seeking to establish their own greatness apart from intimacy with God (66).

Part 2, “From Exodus to Exile: The Two Religions in Conflict amid God’s People,” explores the historical move to the monarchic period and the rise of regional empires. Howard-Brook cites the work of Jon Levenson and his conception of the tension between the “Sinai” tradition and the “Zion” tradition (96). Many readers see these texts as a historical account of the chronological evolutionary development of Israelite society from a tribal basis to a royal basis. The problem presented throughout this period is that the various kings and the people are not faithful to God, rather than an inherent conflict between the two traditions. The “Zion” royal tradition becomes the dominant ideological and theological understanding, and David, Solomon, and Josiah are the heroes of this construct. Howard-Brook argues that the Moses/exodus traditions, the Jeroboam narrative, and the various preexilic prophetic voices, such as Amos and Hosea, call Israel back to the religion of creation “Sinai” tradition. The inclusion of both traditions in the texts of the Hebrew Bible represents a literary compromise that accurately portrays the ongoing debate and struggle over the identity of the Israelite people and their place in a rapidly changing dangerous world (198).

Part 3, “From Exile to Easter: Fallen Jerusalem, Fallen Babylon,” examines exilic and postexilic texts for the continuation of the debate between creation and imperial ideologies. Jeremiah represents a compromise position that is anti-Babylon but pro-Jerusalem (224) while Ezekiel has a much bleaker view of human kingship (231). Ezra–
Nehemiah portray the collaboration with empire (Persia) as the way forward (263), while texts such as Haggai, Zechariah, and Second and Third Isaiah reject such collaboration and present a vision of hope based on a renewed commitment to values of the religion of creation (285). Howard-Brook then examines various canonical and noncanonical texts of the Hellenistic era to illustrate the continuing influence, debate, and dialogue between the theological and ideological stances of these approaches to creation and imperial religion. His schema of royal/establishment wisdom texts (Proverbs, Sirach, Letter of Aristeas), subversive wisdom texts (Daniel, 1 Enoch, Jubilees), and skeptical/ironic wisdom texts (Job, Qoheleth, 3 Maccabees, retellings of Exodus and other biblical texts) provides a fascinating window on the complexities of Diaspora life and the struggle to construct a faithful community (288). The analysis of the disillusionment with Ptolemaic, Seleucid, and Hasmonean policies as illustrated by these texts grounds his interpretations in the social and political realities of this time period and provides an understanding of the rise of various messianic hopes in diverse traditions as the Qumran, Enochic, and nascent Jesus communities.

Part 4, “From Easter to the Eschaton: Jesus’ Fulfillment of the Religion of Creation and Defeat of the Religion of Empire,” argues that the construct of the religion of creation is at the heart of the teachings of Jesus and the writings of Paul and other New Testament writers. Howard-Brook notes that the majority of references in the New Testament are of those Hebrew Bible texts that are in sympathy with a religion of creation orientation (393–98). Given the length of this book, the analysis of New Testament themes seems somewhat cursory and abbreviated. This is not so much a criticism of his work as recognition of the realities of publishing concerns. Happily, Howard-Brook does provide several suggestions of other works to consult to supplement his analysis, including his earlier works and the works of John Dominic Crossan, Richard Horsley, Ched Myers, and Walter Wink, to name just a few sources.

Of course, a work of this scope and magnitude will stimulate discussion and disagreement on many particular points. This is inevitable and desirable; an author would hope for and expect such scrutiny. This review cannot begin to engage with the multiplicity of texts and issues that Howard-Brook considers in this work, and to pick and choose isolated interpretations to praise or critique would do little to help the reader understand the complexity of this work. I found this book to be very stimulating in the global approach to the biblical texts and the analysis of individual texts to support this approach. I especially found his description of the writings of the intertestamental period and the political and social realities of this time period succinct and clear (287–379), one of the better introductions to the complexities of this age. Finally, liberal use of tables throughout the book illustrate in clear fashion the comparisons between and among texts that Howard-Brook highlights and are particularly useful for teaching settings.