The deification of mighty rulers and benefactors was, to some extent, self-evident in late Hellenism and the Roman Empire, the deification of a crucified peasant was certainly not. By contrast, mighty rulers and benefactors did not receive any veneration by early Christians, but the crucified peasant did. Since demonstrated loyalty was of considerable importance in ancient society, this conspicuous (and suspicious) difference posed a serious problem for Christian inculturation, and Luke, always inclined to advocate the inculturated gospel, takes this as a challenge to his narrative theology. This is the subject matter of this Heidelberg dissertation (supervisor: Gerd Theißen).

Let me first summarize the results. Luke, on the one hand, shares with contemporary Judaism and Christianity in general the strict rejection of apotheosis, all the more self-apotheosis. On the other hand, he tries to make the quasi-divinity of Christ comprehensible; this endeavor he shares with the early Christian apologists, although in a comparatively nonaggressive manner. While he seems hesitant to allow for the godlike veneration of the earthly Jesus, he is prepared to reveal at least some understanding for the erroneous apotheosis of the apostles inasmuch as they represent, in their own way, the divine power. However, his narrative makes clear that only the veneration that is authorized by God and is pointed to Jesus is acceptable and true. Luke’s interest in the
apotheosis motif is related to the post-Flavian atmosphere in which, after the assassination of Domitian in 96 C.E., the autocratic style of rulership, including deification claims, was intensively discussed.

In her introduction (11–16) the author defines apotheosis in a broad sense as deification of an outstanding human being considered either as the epiphany of the deity or as a “divine man.” She gives a brief sketch of relevant recent research, which is, however, more enumerative than informative. She then develops her subject in three chapters: “Apotheosis in the Ancient World” (17–86); “True Apotheosis in Luke-Acts” (87–129); and “False Apotheosis in Luke-Acts (130–203).

The first chapter starts with the description of the overlapping spheres of the divine and the human in Egypt, Babylon, Greece, and Rome. Particular attention is given to the revolutionary importance of the personality of Alexander the Great, the consecratio as a means of power enactment in the Roman Empire, and the rather premature deification claims of Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, which eventually led to the damnatio memoriae after their equally premature deaths. With regard to Luke the sidelong glances at the epithet σωτήρ and at the role of charismatic figures are of special interest, although they remain a little scanty. The Hellenistic mixture of thankfulness, admiration, and political calculation laid the foundations for the cult of the goddess Roma and of the emperors, especially in the eastern parts of the empire, but over a longer term and in a sublime and manifold way also in the west. Judaism, as it had developed up to the Hellenistic era, was a monotheistic religion and, in contrast to the widely held philosophical monotheism, not prone to conceptual synthesis. This naturally resulted in a clash with the dominant culture. The author describes extensively the crises of Antiochus Epiphanes and Caligula. Notwithstanding a certain openness to intermediate figures in early Judaism, she uncovers three criteria for safeguarding the integrity of the monotheistic framework: the transcendence of God; the exclusive cultic veneration of God; and the theocentric option according to which any mediating numinous figures owe their status and power to God’s initiative. The early Christian writers—Kezbere presents Ad Diognetum, the apologist Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Origen—struggle between the rejection of the apotheosis of human beings, often ascribed to daemonic influence, and the philosophical and theological legitimization of the divine veneration of Jesus Christ.

Having expanded the historical and ideological horizon, Kezbere dedicates her second chapter to the Lukan passages on the theologically adequate form of apotheosis and explores the dramaturgy of a threefold and climactic revelation of Jesus’ dignity. On the occasion of his baptism (Luke 3:21–22), Jesus, whose human stock is illustrated in the genealogy, is proclaimed as the Son of God by the heavenly voice, but he himself does not claim any divinity. He is not adored at the Jordan, and the temptation narrative makes
clear that he does not want to be. Instead, he himself offers prayers. In some way the transfiguration narrative (Luke 9:28–36) may be read as a functional parallel: on his way to the cross, which cannot be mistaken as a triumphant path of divine glory, the heavenly voice reveals Jesus, who is shown again in a praying pose, as the Son of God. The christophany is obviously God’s prerogative. When Peter is hindered from building three shelters, this may indicate some reservation against any cultic veneration at this earthly stage. It is the scene of ascension (Luke 24:50–53; Acts 1:9–11) that resembles most closely the contemporary standard of an apotheosis, and Kezbere wonders if it may have served as a counterdefinition of what true worship means. Jesus as the ascending Lord, no longer praying but blessing, accedes to his universal dominion, and it is now that he, for the first time, receives the proskynesis of his disciples.

The third chapter switches from Luke’s christological affirmation to his critical view of the dark forms of deification. The worship demanded of Jesus by Satan (Luke 4:5–8) is programmatically, and with sociomorphic terminology (οἶκουμένη, ἐξουσία), introduced as a disclosure scene that unmasks the character of the Roman Empire in so far as it exceeds the limits of legitimate rule and leads to a usurpation of God’s exclusive rights. In this trajectory Luke, dependant probably on a Jewish tradition and sharing a common background with Josephus (Ant. 19:343–352), interprets the sudden and public death of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:21–23) as being the just response to his triumphant self-enactment and indulgence of divine attributes in the theater of Caesarea. In contrast, Paul and Barnabas, in a comparable position of being worshiped in Lystra, react in the only suitable way by passionately rejecting the impending blasphemy and informing the pagans that the apostles are not deities but messengers of the one living God. Thus they are human tokens of the heavenly world, but they are not supernatural beings themselves. In a less breathtaking but distinct way the Godfearer Cornelius is corrected by Peter when he, in a sort of pagan bearing, falls at his feet to worship the apostle at his arrival in Caesarea (10:25–26). Faced with the miraculous earthquake and the putative liberation of his prisoners, the jailer in Philippi performs a proskynesis before Paul and Silas, too, and is similarly referred to the Christian faith, in which his worshiping will find its proper place (16:25–34). The barbarians of Malta or (Kezbere shows some sympathy for this alternative) Kephallenia are the only exception from the demonstrated rule, for Paul does not reproach them when they consider him a god (28:1–6). There are, however, no indications of cultic veneration, and presumably Paul did not even learn about their naïve rumor. Furthermore, there is, according to Kezbere, a subtle correction of the false apotheosis when Paul is presented as healing the father of his host by means of prayer (28:8).

This is a shrewd and constructive dissertation. The main advance it contributes to the interpretation of Luke-Acts is the insight that the Third Evangelist is nothing less than a
politically pliable apologist whose overall concern it is to illustrate that Christianity is no danger to the Roman order. Luke, to be sure, has an apologetic interest, but it is aimed at the gospel’s capability of being integrated into the social culture of its time. Kezbere shows that there is, despite its mildness, a critical and polemical thrust in the Lukan narrative. The proposed context of this political sensitivity in the early post-Flavian period is most suggestive, but much labor has still to be done in order to clarify to what extent the peculiarity of Domitian’s reign was actually realized by wider sections of the population.

On the whole, the exegesis presented here is more solid than innovative, but, all things considered, this is more helpful than the contrary. The author often contents herself with the description of scholarly opinions without substantiating her own alternative. A thorough discussion of the Greco-Roman sources concerning apotheosis and Domitian’s claims is regrettably missing. It is, of course, the author’s right to choose only a “small prism” (210), but there are manifold perspectives that are lost from view in this way. Perhaps Luke’s judgment is not as differentiated as the author thinks (204) but his narrative less consistent. There is a shining-through of divine reality in many episodes, and the lines between acceptable veneration and human self-limitation are not as clear-cut as the author suggests. Even the shadow of Peter or the handkerchiefs and aprons of Paul have their mana-like power. To put it briefly, the numinous belongs, in Luke’s view, to the Christian side of the world, and beyond this side both numinous occurrences and human veneration are, at best, misunderstandings.

Paradoxically enough, early Christianity has done a lot to imprint monotheism on the Roman world, but its own monotheism was from the beginning not beyond all doubt. Kezbere lets us imagine how subtle and risky the process was that developed what may be called a form of theocentric Christology.