One of the most amazing and indeed puzzling phenomena in earliest Christianity is the speed with which Jesus received a divine status and the question of the origins of this development. The former is attested already in the letters of Paul and in the gospels, here both in narrative and in the sayings of Jesus referring to himself as “the son of God.” The origins and background of this divinisation has been the object of a long-standing discussion in modern scholarship. It is also the prime interest of David Litwa’s *Iesus Deus*, which studies six aspects of this process and surveys scholarship in an introductory chapter entitled “The ‘Deification’ of Jesus Christ” (1–35). The major players in the debate are all well-known: W. Bousset, M. Hengel, L. Hurtado; so is the major question: Should we look for a Jewish or rather for a Greco-Roman background to explain the development? Litwa offers good summaries of the positions and the nuances in the debate, touching also upon such vexed questions as the notorious “divine man” thesis (stressing above all the difference between the “classic” figures listed under this category and the deification process of Jesus) and the potential and limits of comparative research (much indebted to the views of J. Z. Smith). His own position is spelled out somewhere in the midst of the chapter and reflects the uneasiness of scores of scholars with a one-sided view. It is not a matter of either/or of Greek or Jewish, as many have thought; it is all much more complicated. In several respects, core issues of Second Temple Judaism
formed the prime matrix of early Christianity, but this is a Judaism shaped by centuries of Hellenistic culture; moreover, Christianity soon also grew out of this matrix to embrace still other aspects of that “second” tradition. Litwa proposes to reach beyond the dichotomy, and this is probably the only way out of the conundrum. Ancient Christianity from its very beginnings, or in any case very soon after, is Jewish and Greek and (a bit) Roman. The parallels or influences do not have to be formulated in terms of borrowing from or accommodating to mainstream culture; it is all more natural and more complex at the same time. Christianity did not seek to be like the others; rather, it wanted to transcend or be superior to those others, all while being steeped in the same culture and traditions and having assimilated not a few of these. As Litwa formulates it, “If Christians were socialized in predominantly Greco-Roman environments, it is no surprise that they employed and adapted common traits of deities and deified men to exalt their lord to divine status” (20). Litwa is probably right, even if this means that the clearcut but somewhat artificial distinctions of a past scholarship have now become obsolete.

Litwa then proceeds to illustrate this from several motifs and episodes from the gospels. The first two chapters deal with representations of divine birth and childhood. Luke’s version of Jesus’s birth and Plutarch’s account of Plato’s divine conception (Mor. 717e–718b) are compared for the first topic, the so-called Infancy Gospel of Thomas and a number of pagan “wonder boys” (Hermes, Heracles, Dionysius) for the other. Luke and Plutarch are both looking for ways to present the divine status of their hero in a way that avoids giving in to crass anthropomorphism, yet also secures the authenticity and “plausibility” of the account. They are stating a theological truth for a world that accepts the possibility of this kind of divine–human contact. Infancy Gospel of Thomas fully adapts his presentation of the boy Jesus to the lines set out by those predecessors speaking of Greek (semi)gods; its Jesus does nothing a divine child is supposed to have the power to perform, including devastating acts that make a modern reader most uneasy.

Miracle working is one other tool for describing and authenticating a divine figure. Origen knew this, and he also knew the risks involved and struggled with them in his reply to Celsus. The solution is as simple as it is persuasive: Jesus does nothing that had not been done by Greek heroes, perhaps only better and more impressively. It would probably not have impressed Celsus, who looks as if he cannot be persuaded, but it may have had an effect on others reading this reply. The problem, it would seem, is not that Jesus can be likened to such other heroes of the past but that he would have surpassed them. Miracles are only one way in which divine figures change our world. They can only change themselves and reveal themselves in their true, divine, nature. Jesus’s transfiguration is an epiphany, it has long been stated, and as an epiphany it compares to (but then also supersedes) Moses’s transfiguration in Jewish tradition, which itself could be likened and made “acceptable” by comparing it to the whole range of similar effects.

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that were recalled for Dionysius or the Ptolemaic kings of Egypt. Again, worlds combined and touching upon each other. It is not different for the next theme: Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. As the account of the apotheosis of his life and of his person, the motif was well known long before the evangelists put pen to paper. However, as with the miracles (and epiphany), there is a twist and a problem with this: Christians were ready to accept that ascent into the heavens (after death) and immortalization would go hand in hand—for their Jesus but not for all those others who had preceded him in this. That is the angle in the flesh.

Finally, there is the power of name giving. In this respect, as well, Christians fully entered into imitation of (and competition with) all those others who had cared for naming their god, when developing a Christology that includes both “human” and highly divine names and titles. This may in a sense perhaps have been one of the more (or even the most) delicate issues in confronting the Greek and Roman world, as they entered a domain that was also assiduously exploited by imperial propaganda. But once again, as Litwa sees it, the competition was in part also falsified, for in the end there could be only one to win the game.

The tension between competing, borrowing, and “conquering” is integral to the way Christians developed their view on Jesus, but it is proof that they did indeed “borrow” and knew where to look for the stuff they needed for their purpose. Actually, the early Christians did not have to look hard: it was all over the place and accessible also to those who had not studied their Homer or Virgil in all detail, and they did not have to care for some of the cautions and theologically motivated criticisms modern scholars of early Christianity have brought forward against such an approach. “Christian experience of Jesus and Christian readings of Scripture were conditioned by cultural patterns of thought about the nature and character of divinity” (220). It is enough to realize and accept this to make things work.