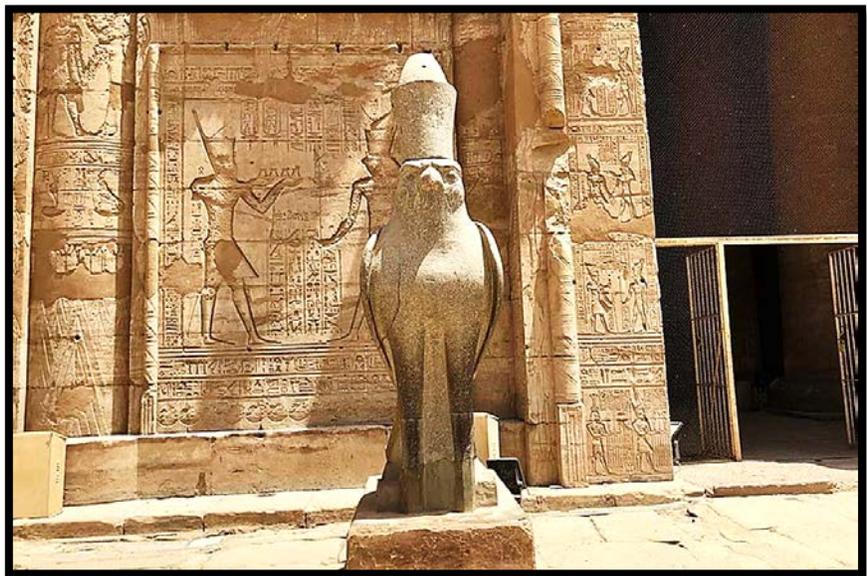




Out Of Egypt I have Called My Son: The Jesus-Horus Debate

Jim Willis

On the west bank of the Nile River, south of Luxor, lies the ancient city of Edfu. There stands a great temple dedicated to the god Horus, always pictured with the head of a falcon. The temple was completed in about 57 BC, after a 180-year period of construction. *"And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt have I called my son."(Matthew 2:17).*



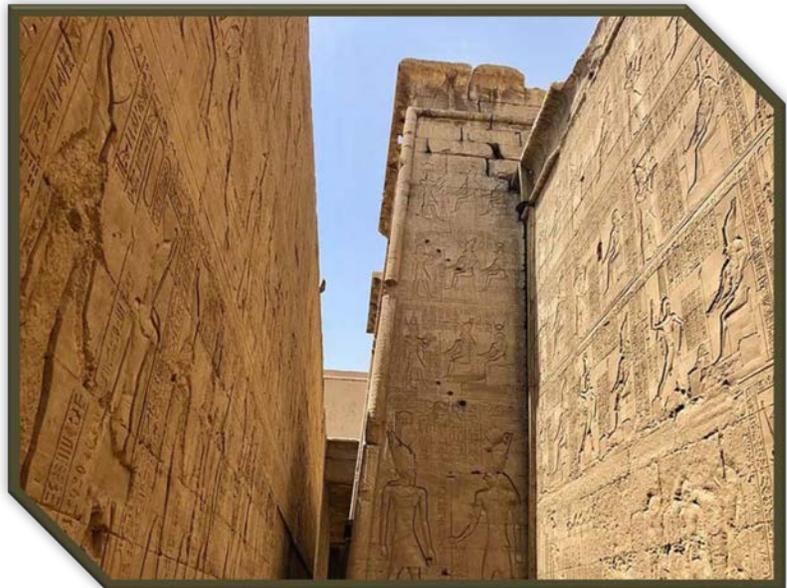
If, as the *Gospel According to Matthew* in the *New Testament* claims, the holy family fled to Egypt to escape the slaughter of innocents wrought by King Herod in an effort to kill the baby the Magi claimed was born 'King of the Jews', chances are they might have seen this great edifice, finished only a few decades before the birth of Jesus. Whether Joseph and Mary ever saw the temple or not, it is certain that those who compiled the *New Testament* must have known about the texts it contained. They were famous throughout the Roman empire, which constituted the bulk of the western world. Every educated person would have at least heard about them.



Flight Into Egypt by Edwin Long, (1883) (Public Domain)

The Edfu Texts

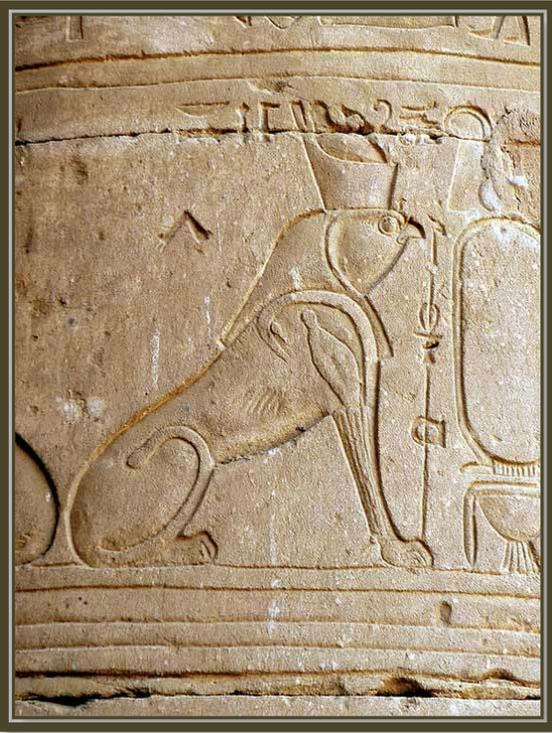
Archaeology at Edfu reveals that this site was built to be a huge and extensive library, written in the form of hieroglyphs, or sacred scripts, carved on the temple walls. Even more interesting is the fact that when the texts began to be translated, it became apparent that this temple stands on the location of an even older temple that dates back to a forgotten time known as the *Zep Tepi*, or 'First Time,' which happened thousands of years before the first pharaohs.



Edfu texts, carved on the temple walls. (CC0)

Seven Sages, the texts reveal, appeared in ancient Egypt, sailing from somewhere called the 'Homeland of the Primeval Ones', which was a sacred island in the midst of the western ocean. The island was destroyed in a great cataclysm in which *'the earliest mansions of the gods'* had once stood. Some of them survived and, according to the Edfu texts, set forth in their great ships to wander the world in order to bring about *"the resurrection of the former world of the gods."* Their mission, in other words, was to re-create their destroyed world. They established a series of sacred mounds up and down the course of the Nile River. These mounds, according to the Edfu texts, established the foundations of all future temples to be built in Egypt.

The Jesus-Horus Debate



Her-em-akhet (Greek: Harmakhis), the wall relief of a hieracosphinx depicted at the Temple of Horus in Edfu (CC BY-SA 3.0)

crossroads. Anyone traveling north from Egypt by land on the way to Europe or Asia, or anywhere along the Fertile Crescent, has to go through Israel. Israel thus served as a sort of melting-pot of ideas, mixing east with west, and north with south. The Apostle Paul would certainly have been familiar with the Egyptian story, being both a Jewish scholar and a Roman citizen.

St Paul by El Greco (1605) John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art (Public Domain)

The similarity to the flood stories found in *Genesis* immediately stands out. Even the similarities between this and the Atlantis tradition are apparent. But what is even more important are the connections to be found concerning the god Horus, to whom the temple is dedicated, and the story of Jesus. Horus, it seems, was born of a virgin, a 'son of god'. And that is just the beginning of the story. Is the Horus legend the basis of what the Gospels would later call the Christ story?

Tom Harpur, before his death in 2017, was an Anglican priest, a seminary professor, and a religion writer for the *Toronto Star* who wrote a number of best-selling books about the Bible and related themes. Perhaps his most controversial one was entitled *The Pagan Christ*, which was published in 2004. In it, he puts forth the theory that the entire Jesus story found in the Bible is a rendering of the story of Osiris, Isis, and Horus, which would have been well-known in Israel. The homeland of the Bible, after all, stands at a



In Harpur's own words, this is how he sums up his theory: *"The Christian myths were first related of Horus or Osiris, who was the embodiment of divine goodness, wisdom, truth, and purity. This was the greatest hero that ever lived in the mind of man — not in the flesh — to influence with transforming force; the only hero to whom the miracles were natural because he was not human."* Harpur was drawn to the Egyptian myth after becoming convinced that Egypt, not Israel, was really the "cradle of the Jesus figure of the Gospels." Again, in his own words: *"Here already was the story of how the divine son "left the courts of heaven" and descended to earth as the baby Horus. Born of a virgin (through whom he "became flesh" or entered into matter) he then became a substitute for humanity, went down into Hades as the quickener of the dead, their justifier and redeemer, "the first fruits" and leader of the resurrection into the life to come".*

The biblical gospels, according to Harpur's theory, are really a dramatization of the story about incarnation and resurrection that Egyptian priests had been recounting for, perhaps, thousands of years. They were transferred to the pages of the Bible from Egyptian mythology, through Egyptian Gnostic mysticism, then Hellenic philosophy, then Hebrew religion, and finally into the Greek of the New Testament and into the arena of history. Harpur goes on to say: *"Unaware that the original mythos of messianic mystery, the virgin motherhood, the incarnation and birth, the life and character, the crucifixion and resurrection of the Savior Son who was the word of all ages, the alpha and omega, was already part of the Egyptian religion since earliest times, the compilers of the New Testament missed the point entirely that the whole thing was meant allegorically".*

Generalized Egyptian Mythology

Harpur is probably generous when he says the compilers of the New Testament were unaware of the Egyptian texts. It is hard to believe they could not have known what every other educated scholar knew at the time. One can even surmise that the Apostle Paul, himself an educated scholar, might have made use of the story in his quest to shape the Jewish faith into one that was open and welcoming to gentiles as well. The Roman Church eventually used the same techniques, 'baptizing', as it were, pagan holidays that became known as Christmas and Easter in order to create a unifying religion and thus cement an empire.



Horus, Osiris and Isis, the protagonists of the Osiris myth (Twenty-second Dynasty) (Rama/CC BY-SA 3.0)

It thus becomes appropriate to ask what the early biblical writers knew about Egyptian mythology, especially when it comes to the Osiris/Isis/Horus story. A professor with the delightful name of Sir Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge was an English Egyptologist who worked with the British Museum before his death in 1934. Known not only for his historical work, he was a philologist, - an expert in languages and their interconnections. He wrote about Egyptian mythology in these words: *“From the hieroglyphic texts of all periods of the dynastic history of Egypt we learn that the god of the dead, par excellence, was the god commonly known to us as “Osiris.” The oldest religious texts known to us refer to him as the great god of the dead, and in fact he was in respect of the dead and of the Underworld what Ra (the primary Egyptian Sun god) was to the living and to this world”.*

In Egyptian mythology, Isis was either the consort or wife of Osiris. She was the great goddess, whose love pervaded the heavens, the earth, and even the abode of the dead. She was the personification of that feminine creative power which conceived and brought forth every living

creature. Horus was her son, and thus ‘a son of god’. Osiris and Isis therefore gave birth to Horus, to whom the temple at Edfu was dedicated.

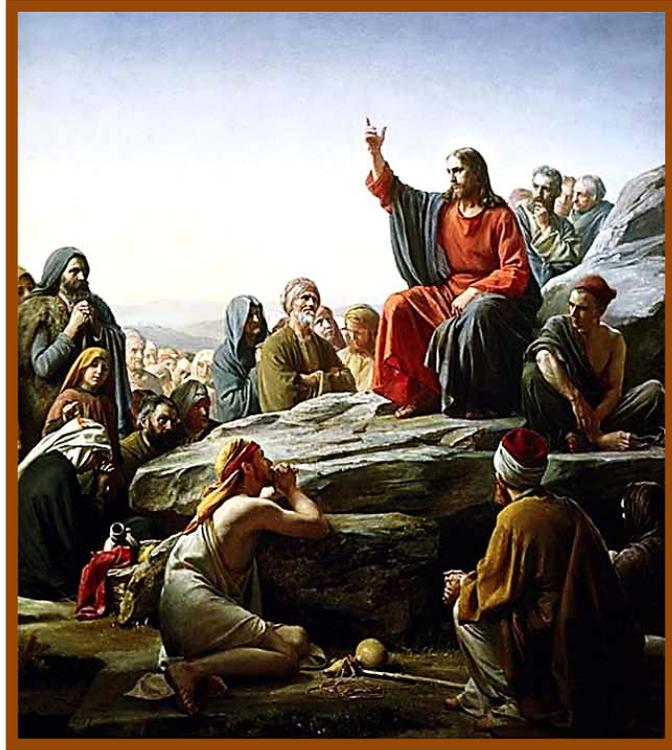


Isis nursing Horus (circa 1070–343 BC) Metropolitan Museum Of Art (CCO)

It was a story known all over the Greco-Roman world. Eventually what was called the *Hellenistic Mysteries of Isis* became a universal cult. The ‘male god/female god/son of god’ story was well known. Could this have been the basis of the ‘God, Mary, Jesus’ story, especially when the *Gospel According to Matthew* specifically goes to great pains to say, *“Out of Egypt have I called my son”*?

Harpur devotes a whole book to examining the similarities. Here are just a few of them: Horus was baptized in the River Eridanus by a god-like figure known as Anup the Baptizer. Jesus was baptized in the River Jordon by a mysterious figure named John the Baptist. Like Jesus, Horus had no history between the ages of 12 and 30. Like Jesus, Horus walked on water, cast out demons, and healed the sick. Like Jesus, Horus was transfigured on a mountain. Horus delivered his own version of a *Sermon on the Mount*, and his followers ever-after faithfully recounted the sayings of the one they called Iusa. Horus was crucified between two thieves, buried in a tomb, and resurrected. His personal title was either *Iusa* or *Iusu*, the ‘ever-becoming son’ of *Ptah* or ‘the Father’.

The Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew, by Carl Bloch (1877) (Public Domain)



Significantly, Horus was called the 'Anointed One', from a word which was inscribed or painted on the lid of a mummy's coffin, millennia before Christianity duplicated the story. Horus was called the Good Shepherd, the Lamb of God, the Bread of Life, the Son of Man, the Word, and the Fisher of Men. Horus was not considered to be simply the path to heaven. Instead, he was thought to be the way by which the dead travel out of the sepulcher. He was the god whose name was written as the 'road to salvation'. He was thus the 'Way, the Truth, and the Life'.

The Jesus-Mithras Debate



Harpur was not the first to wonder about these connections. Indeed, they go all the way back to Plutarch, a Greek philosopher who lived sometime between 45 and 119 AD, which would place him right in the range of years that the Gospels were written. He, too, studied Egyptian mythology in great depth and commented on the universality of its implications.

Ancient Roman tauroctony dating to the third century AD, depicting Mithras slaying the bull, the most important story of the Mithraic Cult (Serge Ottaviani / CC BY-SA 3.0)

Other similarities between various mythologies echo the Jesus story — similarities that were well known to those who wrote the Bible. Mithras, for instance, was called ‘the soldier's god’ because his cult was recognized by many soldiers in the Roman army of the first century. Born of a virgin at the time of the winter solstice, he came forth to slay the sacred bull, shedding its holy blood to save mankind. At the conclusion of a final meal of bread and wine with his followers, he ascended to heaven after promising he would one day return.

Universality Of Themes

The stories go on and on, but it is important to know that they in no way discredit the Christian story. It has, after all, stood the test of time and comforted many millions of believers. But it is not the only story that features mythological themes found around the world and down through time. The presence of these themes need not discredit one story, or be considered a way of disproving any of them, or all of them. Instead, they point to the universality of what the themes represent. They all point to the same source. They all reference the human need for aid in what is often a complex life, and the certainty that the ancients believed one is not alone, but rather part of a greater story that is being enacted on the pages of history. Whether they are read literally or allegorically, the truth they point to is real, declare the ancient writers, and not confined by national or religious boundaries.

Take, for instance, this excerpt from an ancient document called the *Corpus Hermeticum - The Lament of Hermes the Egyptian*: “Do you not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is an image of heaven, or, to speak more exactly, in Egypt all the operations of the powers which rule and work in heaven have been transferred to earth below? Nay, it should rather be said that the whole Cosmos dwells in this our land as in its sanctuary.” (Adapted from a translation by Philip Coppens). This text was written somewhere between the first and third centuries AD. It was probably written in Greek and later translated into Latin. Only the Latin is now known to scholars. The original Greek version has long been lost.

Christian statue of Jesus as the "Good Shepherd" (c. 300-350) from the Catacombs of Domitilla, Rome (Dnlor/ CC BY-SA 3.0)





Roman copy of a fifth-century BC Greek statue showing Hermes, the god of travelers, carrying a ram over his shoulders in his role as Kriophoros (:File:Museo Barracco / CC BY-SA 3.0)

The author is said to be the mythical god Hermes Trismegistus, which means, accurately even if it is a bit cumbersome, 'Hermes the three-times big'. For many years it was thought that this book was written during the Middle Ages, but then came the discovery of a copy contained in the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt in 1945, along with other examples of Gnostic literature. The Lament is very moving. It predicts an end to true religion in Egypt:

"There will come a time when it will be seen that in vain have the Egyptians honored the deity with heartfelt piety and assiduous service; and all our holy worship will be found bootless and ineffectual. For the gods will return from earth to heaven. Egypt will be forsaken, and the land which was once the home of religion will be left desolate, bereft of the presence of its deities".



The deceased makes offering to the god Osiris, god Horus, and goddess Isis. At the upper part, the winged sun-disc, with two cobras appears above images of the Eye of Horus. Funerary stele of Tjreirei for Ra-Horakhty. (Roman period, first to second century AD). State Museum of Egyptian Art, Munich. (Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin/ CC BY-SA 4.0)

Magic And Gnostics

Many archaeologists have suggested that, contrary to traditionally accepted wisdom, the Egyptian pyramids and megaliths were built not as tombs but as earthly representations of the heavens. In other words, if one were able to fly high above the land and look down, what would be visible would be a mirror image of the principal constellations of the heavens.

Egypt was once a land of magic. The pharaoh was seen not just as a king. He was a god, the very presence on earth of the divine in human form. Ritual dominated the Egyptian landscape. It was important to do things ‘decently and in order’, as the old Scottish rite phrased it. It was the duty of a magician to be a bridge between the material world and the spiritual world.

When Moses stood before the pharaoh and called for freedom, he confronted court magicians. In the great contest of plagues that led to the Exodus, the magicians fought against him, mimicking his miracles until they fell by the wayside and eventually lost the contest. They did not fulfill a Shamanic role. Shamans travel between two worlds as well, but their role is usually not to lead ritualistic ceremonies. That is the job of the priest.



*Moses and Aaron before Pharaoh: An Allegory of the Dinteville Family (1537)
Metropolitan Museum of Art (Public Domain)*

It was in this role that Gnosticism found its way into early Christianity, and why it was considered so dangerous. The early Alexandrian Gnostics, influenced as they were by the culture of Egyptian magicians who surrounded them, must have realized their end was near. The world was about to change.

It was about to become much more rooted in practical politics than revelatory religion. Thus, they wrote: *“This land, which once was holy, a land which loved the gods, and wherein alone, in reward for her devotion, the gods deigned to sojourn upon earth, a land which was the teacher of mankind in holiness and piety, this land will go beyond all in cruel deeds ... the survivors will be known for Egyptians by their tongue alone, but in their actions, they will seem to be men of another race. O Egypt, Egypt, of thy religion nothing will remain but an empty tale, which thine own children in time to come will not believe. Nothing will be left but graven words, and only the stones will tell of thy piety”.*

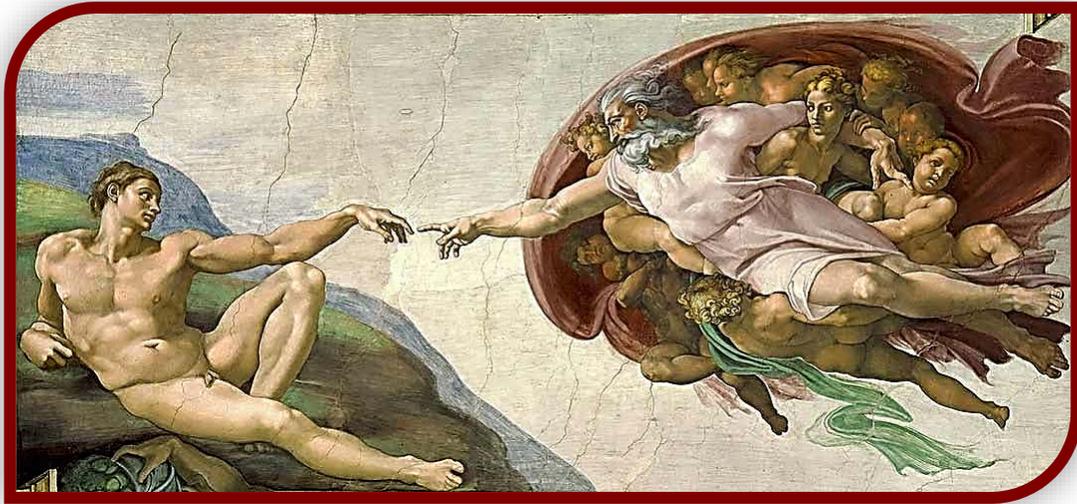
There are those who will say this has all but come to pass. The ancient Egyptian religion of magic and mystery is, for the most part, gone, buried in the shifting sands of the desert. What is left are the 'stones', the enigmatic pyramids and monuments which tell a story written in a language people have forgotten how to read.



The Temple of Edfu is the second largest temple in Egypt. It is also known as the Temple of Horus (Ahmed Emad Hamdy/ CC BY-SA 4.0)

Standing in front of Horus, one sees only a statue. Gazing at the temple of Edfu, which once told a story full of wonder, one sees only hieroglyphic carvings. Admiring the pyramids the principal question is not "What do they mean?", but "How did they do it?" The bond that was once so strong, that connected earth to the heavens, is broken: *"And so the gods will depart from mankind, a grievous thing!, and only evil angels will remain, who will mingle with men, and drive the poor wretches by main force into all manner of reckless crime, into wars, and robberies, and frauds, and all things hostile to the nature of the soul"*.

The gods have departed, and all that is left today are the scars of war and materialistic, economic, pride, and ego. But all is not necessarily lost. The *Lament* offers hope: *"But when all this has befallen ... God, the first before all, the maker of that god who first came into being, will look on that which has come to pass, and will stay the disorder by the counterworking of his will, which is the good ... he will cleanse the world from evil ... and thus he will bring back his world to its former aspect"*. Apparently, the idea that human beings are a manifestation of the divine was once very prevalent. At least until the idea became so frightening to religious authorities that they tried to stamp it out.



Michelangelo - Creation of Adam (1511) Sistine Chapel (Public Domain)

Sadly, our modern world, filled with pandemics and plagues, pollution and politicians, priests and potentates, has too often censored the wisdom of elders. Texts that suggested a divine presence within have too often been sought out and burned, destroyed, and forgotten. They have emphasized original sin at the expense of original blessing. "God saw all that he had made, and behold it was very good." Harmony and balance, long the catchwords of the ancients, were broken, in favor of human hubris. The ancients tried to teach us. But we would not listen.

In 1972, Don McLean wrote a popular song entitled *Vincent* (Starry, Starry Night). It was a tribute to Vincent Van Gogh. In it, he captured, perhaps as well as anyone ever has, the plight of those who listen to distant voices which are drowned out by human hubris:

*"Now I think I know what you
tried to say to me,
How you suffered for your
sanity,
How you tried to set them free.
They would not listen, they're
not listening still.
Perhaps they never will..."*



Starry night by Vincent van Gogh (1889) (Public Domain)

No doubt the author of the Lament would have identified with McLean's song. Hermes Trismegistus saw the end not only of a way of life, but of a way of thinking, and a way of seeing purpose and meaning behind life's vicissitudes. Real religion, he said, consisted of living in harmony with our surroundings while we listen for unspoken words and unsung songs. It is a tragedy that the force which censored this lament, with all of its wisdom and melancholy, was the church, aided by its political arm, the state. The world has never quite recovered.

*This is an excerpt adapted from Jim Willis' book, **Censoring God: Lost Books of the Bible and Other Suppressed Scriptures**, published by Visible Ink Press in April of 2021.*

Top Image: Statue of Horus, Temple of Horus at Edfu (CC0)

References

The Lost Books of the Bible and The Forgotten Books of Eden. 1926. New York, NY: The World Syndicate Publishing Co

Harpur, Tom. 2004. *The Pagan Christ*. Toronto, Canada: Thomas Allen Publishers.

Willis, Jim. 2004. *The Religion Book: Places, Prophets, Saints and Seers*. Detroit, MI: Visible Ink Press.

Witzel, E. J. M. 2012. *The Origin of the World's Mythologies*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press