

KMT, Fall 2022

Sacred Nile is not so much a book about the Nile as it is about faith — faith that began on the banks of the river thousands of years ago, and faith which continues to be practiced there. Higgins's background led him to this book. As a child growing up in Alabama, his family felt he had a spiritual calling and he became a child minister, preaching from the pulpit before he was a teenager. After Alabama, he was a *New York Times* photographer for decades, but also a well-known fine arts photographer.

So, like the Nile, these sources joined to form a whole. There have been many beautiful — even spectacular, photography books about Egypt — but this one is different. The photos are imbued with this sense of spirituality and the book documents everything from ancient Egyptian religion to Christianity and Islam.

The book covers the various Nilotic regions — Egypt, Sudan, etc — but the Ethiopian photos will probably provide greatest new information to KMT readers. Here the spiritual aspect of the book is strongest, probably because we are shown modern worshippers practicing their ancient religious customs.

Each September/October the Oromo people celebrate the festival of *Erecha* throughout Ethiopia. The ritual for purification, atonement and renewal takes place beside lakes and on the banks of rivers. The site where Higgins photographed had a sacred tree near the water, which the participants smeared with butter as an offering. A line of men and women dressed in white descend to the water carrying bundles of green grass and flowers, symbols of rebirth. Led by a priestess whom holds a flail in one hand and a forked staff in the other, they dip the flowers and grass into the sacred waters and anoint themselves. It is a celebration which could have taken place thousands of years ago.

Higgins assisted an Ethiopian physical anthropologist who wanted to document the rituals, so he was granted access to sites and rituals usually off limits to outsiders. He was even permitted to enter the Temple of the Woman, a circular wooden structure with a central pillar bearing four cow udders.

Those photos are both beautiful and precious glimpse into a world rarely seen.

Higgins is a techie and, to photograph the Christian churches at Lalibela, he hauled in hundreds of pounds of equipment so he could light the rock-cut churches at night and still get the stars above (p. 174). For this reviewer, these other-worldly photos alone are worth the price of the book. But the volume doesn't chronicle only Christian spirituality, it covers the full range, from ancient Egypt to Islam.

The photos of the Ethiopian Jews as especially interesting. Here we don't get images of monuments, but rather of people worshipping as they probably did in ancient times. They are celebrating Simcha Torah and other traditional holidays, but often out of doors, not in modern synagogues like those around the world.

While the Ethiopian segments are the freshest and most compelling in *Sacred Nile*, the other sections also contain images from perspectives not seen elsewhere. Even the most jaded Egyptophile will find something new in the photos of Egypt. For example, the image of the Temple of Amen reflected at night in the sacred lake at Karnak is unlike any image of the site I have ever seen (p. 96).

The text of *Sacred Nile* is straight-forward, appropriate of the spiritual theme of the book. There are, however, a couple of statements which are not quite right. The term "Nubia" is probably not derived from the ancient word for gold (nub). Rather, it comes from Eratosthenes's account of meeting a tribe called the Nuba. In ancient Egyptian times the region was called "Land of the Bow." Also, I wonder why it is asserted that the Egyptian dynasties stopped in the Fourth Century BC. What about the Ptolemies? To be fair, these are minor flubs which can be corrected in a second edition. The photographer, Chester Higgins, and his wife/writer Betsy Kissam have produced a remarkable work that is in a class of its own." Egyptologist, Dr Bob Brier