

Rastafarianism

By Rick Branch

Founder: Marcus Garvey's philosophy is credited as the beginning point.

Founding Date: 1930

Official Publication: None

Organization Structure: No official church buildings or leaders. Each individual group and person is autonomous.

Unique Terms: *Babylon* is Jamaica or the establishment. *I and I* refers to God in all or the brotherhood of mankind

Other Names: *Ras Tafari* and *Rastas*

While it is most often associated with dreadlocks, smoking of marijuana and reggae music, the Rastafarian religion is much more than simply a religion of Jamaica. With its beginnings in the Jamaican slums, Rastafarianism has spread throughout the world and currently has a membership of over 700,000.¹

HISTORY

As with many other religious groups, the history of this one also begins before the group itself. Marcus Garvey, born in 1887, would direct the philosophical ideologies that would eventually grow into the Rastafarian movement.

In the early 1920's, Garvey was an influential black spokesman and founder of the "back-to-Africa" movement. He often spoke of the redemption of his people as coming from a future black African king.² On one occasion, Garvey proclaimed, "Look to Africa for the crowning of a Black King, he shall be the Redeemer."³ Only a few years later that prediction would be fulfilled in the person of Ethiopia's king, Haile Selassie. As Barrett has explained, "in the pantheon of the Rastafarians, Marcus Garvey is second only to Haile Selassie."⁴

On November 2, 1930, Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned king of Ethiopia. Upon his coronation, he claimed for himself the titles of "Emperor Haile Selassie (Power of the Trinity) I, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and King of the Kings of Ethiopia."⁵ After the crowning of Selassie and the apparent fulfillment of the millennial expectations of Marcus Garvey, the Rastafarian movement gained a following and officially began in 1930.⁶

One of its early leaders was Leonard Howell, who in 1933 was "arrested by the Jamaican government for preaching a revolutionary doctrine."⁷ While Howell's doctrines (which will be noted later) helped shape the theology of the movement, his arrest helped shape the movement's organizational structure. As Barrett explained, "The harassment of Howell by the police might have been the reason why Rastafarians

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have decided to remain leaderless, a decision which has strengthened the movement.”⁸

One of the key Rastafarian doctrines was their expectation that they would one day return to Africa, “the Zion which would be restored to them after centuries in the Diaspora.”⁹ Garvey, with his “back-to-Africa” ideology had inspired much of this hope.

In 1960 this anticipated move seemed potentially possible. With the help of the Jamaican government, a delegation of Rastafarians set out on a mission to Africa.

Though no large-scale immigration to Africa by Jamaicans was achieved, the sending of some Rastafarian leaders to Africa resulted in the movement’s enhanced knowledge of African realities, and probably diffused the movement’s enthusiasm for immediate repatriation.¹⁰

An important historical event in the Rastafarian movement occurred when Haile Selassie visited Jamaica on April 21, 1966. This event resulted in two profound developments within the movement. First, Selassie convinced the Rastafarian brothers that they “should not seek to immigrate to Ethiopia until they had liberated the people of Jamaica.” Second, from that time forth, April 21 has been celebrated as a “special holy day” among Rastafarians.¹¹

On August 27, 1975, Haile Selassie died. With his death came various forms of rationalization from many Rastafarians. The responses concerning Selassie’s death ranged from “his death was a fabrication” to “his death was inconsequential because Haile Selassie was merely a ‘personification’ of God.”¹² As the *Magical Blend* states, “When Selassie died in 1975, his divinity did not die with him. According to current belief, the Ras Tafari lives on through individual Rastafarians.”¹³

Currently, the Rastafarian movement has official branches in England, Canada, the Caribbean islands and America as well as members in most of the civilized countries.¹⁴ It has also experienced some fragmentation since the death of Selassie. One of the prominent splinter-groups, known as the Twelve Tribes of Israel, founded by Vernon Carrington has its headquarters in New York.¹⁵ Other groups which “claim allegiance to Ras Tafari” are the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church and the Ethiopian World Federation.¹⁶

DOCTRINE

As Cashmore has observed, “The belief system of Ras Tafari was so vague and loosely defined, even at its inception, due to its lack of a single authoritative voice, that what was to be acceptable doctrine was largely a matter of individual interpretation.”¹⁷

Early in the history of the movement, Leonard Howell gave the Rastafarians six principles.

(1) hatred for the White race; (2) the complete superiority of the Black race; (3) revenge on Whites for their wickedness; (4) the negation, persecution, and humiliation of the government and legal bodies of Jamaica; (5) preparation to go back to Africa; and (6) acknowledging Emperor Haile Selassie as the Supreme Being and only ruler of Black people.¹⁸

As Barrett notes, “This first glimpse of the new doctrine that launched the Rastafarian movement has not changed significantly over the years.”¹⁹

Aside from these six principles are two overriding concepts that are key to the Rastafarian system. First is the idea or teaching about Babylon which refers to the

Jamaican government, the establishment or the white oppressors in general.²⁰ The second concept is that of I and I which has “become arguably the most important theoretical tool apart from the Babylonian conspiracy in the Rastafarian repertoire.”²¹ Cashmore explains,

I and I is an expression to totalize the concept of oneness. ‘I and I’ as being the oneness of two persons. So God is within all of us and we’re one people in fact. ‘I and I’ means that God is in all men. The bond of Ras Tafari is the bond of God, of man. But man itself needs a head and the head of man is His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie of Ethiopia.²²

Other doctrines which are more loosely taught and believed by the Rastafarians are the following:

1) Rastafarians have a doctrine of avatar which is very similar to Hinduism. They believe, “God revealed himself in the person of Moses, who was the first avatar or savior. The second avatar was Elijah. The Third avatar was Jesus Christ. Now the advent of Ras Tafari is the climax of God’s revelation.”²³ They even teach that Jesus predicted the coming of Haile Selassie.²⁴

2) The devil is actually the god of the White man.²⁵

3) As with many new religious movements, the Rastafarians only accept the Bible conditionally preferring those passages that can be forced to harmonize with their unique doctrines.

Rastas accept the Bible as their central text with the proviso that much of its original material had been deliberately distorted during its translation into English. It is necessary, therefore, to interpret the Bible as critically as possible and recognize the aspects of it which might have been flushed out, included or altered in meaning.

Further, they prefer an allegorical approach to Bible interpretation claiming that the pages of Scripture should be searched for “hidden meanings and directives.”²⁶

4) Women’s role in the Rastafarian movement is at best a subordinate one.²⁷

5) A physical feature that sets the Rastafarians apart from all other groups is the wearing of their hair in dreadlocks. “Dreadlocks were inspired by a biblical injunction against the cutting of one’s hair.”²⁸

6) Another commonly held belief among the Rastafarians is their emphasis on the smoking of marijuana. “Likewise, ganja or marijuana is considered to be the ‘holy herb’ mentioned in the Bible and its smoking is a holy sacrament to many.”²⁹

As Barrett explains, through the use of ganja, the Rastafarian reaches an altered state of consciousness. In this altered state, “the revelation that Haile Selassie is God and that Ethiopia is the home of the Black” is realized. “The herb is the key to new understanding of the self, the universe, and God. It is the vehicle to cosmic consciousness.”³⁰

7) In line with their idea of being the supreme race, the Rastafarians also believe that they “...were the reincarnations of the ancient tribes of Israel who had been enslaved and kept in exile by their white oppressors, the agents of Babylon.”³¹

8) True Rastafarians are also vegetarians.³²

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

As with many other groups which selectively acknowledge biblical passages, the Rastafarians will only accept those parts of the Bible which appear to agree with their unique theological perspectives. However, the following verses may be of some help.

1) Haile Selassie is not the latest avatar of God, for Jesus was the fullness of God (John 1:16; Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:19, 2:9).

2) No race is superior to any other race (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11).

3) While it is true that the Bible does have meanings on various levels of interpretation, it is not a concealed book. Also, it is not a book that can be selectively believed (Rom. 15:4; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20).

4) The Rastafarian's view of Jesus being only one of several "avatars" depreciates Christ's unique claims to deity and His role as sole mediator between God and man (John 8:58; Acts 4:12; 1Tim. 2:5).

Notes

- ¹ *The Rastafarians: Sounds of Cultural Dissonance*, Leonard E. Barrett, Sr., viii.
- ² *Magical Blend*, June/July 1994, 76.
- ³ *The Rastafarians*, 67.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ethiopia and Haile Selassie*, Peter Schwab, editor, 11.
- ⁶ *The Rastafarians*, x.
- ⁷ *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, Keith Crim, editor, 601.
- ⁸ *The Rastafarians*, 91.
- ⁹ *Rastaman*, 243.
- ¹⁰ *The Rastafarians*, 100-101.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 158, 160.
- ¹² *Rastaman: The Rastafarian Movement in England*, Ernest Cashmore, 59-60.
- ¹³ *June/July 1994*, 76.
- ¹⁴ *The Perennial Dictionary of World Religions*, 601.
- ¹⁵ *The Rastafarians*, 210, 227, 236.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.
- ¹⁷ *Rastaman*, 7.
- ¹⁸ *The Rastafarians*, 85.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, xiii, 3, 89.
- ²¹ *Rastaman*, 66.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 67.
- ²³ *The Rastafarians*, 112.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 106.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 108.
- ²⁶ *Rastaman*, 74.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ²⁸ *Magical Blend*, June/July 1994, 76.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, June/July 1994, 76.
- ³⁰ *The Rastafarians*, 254-255.
- ³¹ *Rastaman*, 129.
- ³² *The Rastafarians*, 126



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