

A BRIEF CRITIQUE OF THE RASTAFARI RELIGION¹

BRIEF HISTORY & MAIN FIGURES OF THE MOVEMENT:

What is a “Rasta” &/or who is a “Rasta” are questions which, even in the opinion of Rastafarians themselves, are very difficult to answer. The concept of Rastafarianism is characterized by particularly **marked individualism**. Hardly any two Rastas are in full agreement as to what Rastafarianism is. This will be evident from the following two examples.

“The name Rastafari is derived from the pre-imperial name and title of the last Emperor of Ethiopia. Before he ascended the throne as Haile Selassie I in 1930, he was known as Ras (i.e. Prince) Tafari Makonnen. The late ruler of Ethiopia is a central figure for all Rastas, but opinions as to the role and function which he plays diverge considerably. Whether Haile Selassie himself is God incarnate or only the Messiah returned, whether he is the saviour of the black race, or only the representative of all black-skinned people is interpreted differently according to individual opinions.

“There are even differences in opinions as regard how Rastas refer to themselves. Some call themselves ‘Rastafari’ (with the stress on the last ‘I’ which is pronounced like a normal ‘I’ in English), while others prefer the expression ‘Rastafarian.’ Others again call themselves ‘Rastas’ in which connection some of those who prefer this abbreviated form consider the second half of the word, ‘Fari,’ as a term describing all evil people, that is, all those who have been led astray.”²

THE FORERUNNER/PREDECESSOR OF RASTAFARIANISM....was the “*Back to Africa*” movement that was begun in the 1920’s by a Jamaican named **Marcus Mosiah Garvey**, who had moved to the United States and founded the “*Universal Negro Improvement Association*” (UNIA).

“Born and educated in St. Ann’s Bay, Jamaica, from 1904-1911 Garvey worked as a journalist in Kingston, Jamaica, and traveled throughout Central America organizing migrant West Indian workers. Inspired by Booker T. Washington’s “*Up from Slavery*,” in 1914 Garvey formed the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), an organization modeled after Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and designed to promote education, self-help and racial solidarity among African-American people. Garvey moved the organization to the U.S. in 1916 and lectured in African-American churches throughout the country to gain a wider audience and financial support...

“By 1918 a widely circulated newspaper, the *Negro World*, and numerous UNIA branches enabled Garvey to finance his ill-fated ***Black Star Line Steamship Corporation***, a business venture financed entirely by black stockholders. Garvey also organized the first International Convention of the Negro Peoples of the World. Yet by 1922, rising criticism of Garvey’s Black Nationalism and allegations of mail fraud brought him into conflict with the U.S. Government. In 1925 Garvey was tried and sentenced to five years in the Atlanta Penitentiary, where he remained until President Coolidge commuted his jail term and deported him to Jamaica in 1927. Garvey’s attempts to organize the movement outside America met with little success, and **he died in 1940 at the age of fifty-two.**”³

“**Garvey’s religious view was that African-American people needed to conceive of God as black rather than white and so undo the oppression of European theology over blacks.** These ideas were given institutional support when he established the African Orthodox Church with UNIA chaplain and former [Anglican] priest George A. McGuire as its first bishop. Convinced that no white man would die on a cross for blacks, the church’s art featured a black Christ, a black Madonna and black angels and saints. In his religious views Garvey was a forerunner of some late twentieth-century black theology and the Black Muslim religion.”⁴

¹ Notes compiled by Mike Edwards, December, 2007, St. Vincent & the Grenadines (revised Dec, 2010 & May 2013). Explanatory note: Titles such as *Rastafarianism* & *Rastas* are other names for followers of this religion, and are sometimes preferred by some followers. All material contained in parentheses () is in the original sources, everything in brackets [], as well as all underlining, bolding, and much of the italicizing has been added by me.

² Wolfgang Bender, editor, “*Rastafarian Art*” (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, Jamaica, 1992, 2005), p. 1.

³ Daniel G. Reid, editor, “*Dictionary of Christianity in America*” (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Illinois, 1990), p. 475.

⁴ Reid, pp. 475-476.

“For most Rastas, Garvey is a prophet who, similar to the biblical John the Baptist, heralded the return of the new Messiah as Ras Tafari, Haile Selassie. At the end of the 1920s Garvey is said to have preached ‘*Look to Africa where a black king will be crowned*’. In 1930 Ras Tafari mounted the throne of Ethiopia as Haile Selassie.”⁵

DOCTRINAL BELIEFS: “Rasta does not form a uniform whole on the level of tenets of faith since the differences in the individually expressed opinions are too great...for Rastas **the Bible is the book of books, although they do not accept the Old and New Testaments in their entirety**. Both the version adopted by white churches and by black sects are considered to have corrupted and falsified the revealed works of God. In order to gain full access to the true content of the Bible, a new revelation is needed. This attitude of the Rastafari to the Old and New Testaments has a double effect. [a] On the one hand **their interpretation differs markedly from standard Christian doctrine**; [b] on the other hand, the necessary new revelation which normally takes place individually in small groups **leads to various different interpretations within Rastafarianism. Each Rasta has his own visions and views**, just as in general the conversion to Rastafarianism is normally initiated by a vision.”⁶

“However, what all Rastafari have in common is **their rejection of the conditions in Jamaica**. They all share the opinion that the society of the island is ‘*unjust*.’ ...Rastafarianism has been described from various points of view: [a] firstly as a cult of the Messiah and the Millennium because the last Emperor of Ethiopia is equated with the Messiah whose aim it is to lead his people home and who will then realize a realm of eternal justice; and [b] secondly as a potential protest movement which, at least potentially, maintains revolutionary claims because Rasta rejects the given social, political and economic circumstances in Jamaica.”⁷

“Rastafarianism as an expression of an attitude to life has as its essential and all-embracing motif...the motif **to overcome breaches created by man**. To overcome breaches, **to re-establish unity** is what the members of a movement have in common, which at first sight is vague and heterogeneous...The societies which arose in the Caribbean islands after the coming of the Europeans are literally created by man and are thus artificial. Although the islands were strategically important, almost everything which white conquerors found there ‘in its natural state’ was seen by them as unimportant. In contrast to the American continent, there were hardly any natural deposits of precious metals. Apart from tobacco, the indigenous plants and animals were useless... Thus everything which would later be important for the islands was imported. The inhabitants came as overlords from Europe and as slaves from Africa. Most of the plants and animals were imported from all over the world. Even sugar which for centuries was to determine the face of the islands was originally an imported and not an indigenous plant...Rastafarianism draws an important conclusion; due to the fact that the order on the Caribbean islands did not develop naturally or organically, because it was not created by God but was man-made, it is bad, evil and unjust. From the point of view of the Rastafarians, the Europeans, in wiping out the Indians... [were] presumptuous enough to play the role of God the Creator...According to the Rasta approach to this issue, such an irrational and unnatural order cannot come from God. For the Rastafarians, the societies of the Caribbean are a repetition of the Tower of Babel in which man tries to reach and overtake God. The result could thus only be a new **Babylon**.”⁸

DEFINITION OF “BABYLON”: “**Babylon**, the sinful, which will inevitably fall, **is for Rastas [a] the world in which they have to live: Jamaica and also, in an extended sense, the world of the white man who abducted their ancestors from Africa and carried them off to the New World**. For many Rastas, Babylon is also **[b] a synonym for an unjust order, made by human hand and thus unnatural and a synonym for Capitalism** by which he feels exploited [and] [c] in daily usage, **Babylon is a designation for the Jamaican police**. In this connection the police are not only the representative and protector of a ‘false’ order, but due to the fact that the majority of Rastafarians smoke marijuana for religious reasons—use of which is also prohibited in Jamaica—the police are also their most direct and immediate adversaries. The New Jerusalem, Zion and Mount Zion correspond to Africa which will be resurrected in its original greatness and glory as soon as its scattered daughters and sons have found their way home.”⁹

⁵ Bender, p. 4.

⁶ Bender, op cit., pp. 2 & 4

⁷ Bender, pp. 2 & 9

⁸ Bender, p. 11

⁹ Bender, p. 5

SYMBOLS IN RASTAFARIAN ART:

1. “The central position is occupied by **portraits of Haile Selassie I**, the last Emperor of Ethiopia...
2. “A significant place is also occupied by **portraits of Marcus Mosiah Garvey**, a Jamaican who founded and led greatest organization of blacks in history. His United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) fought for the improvement of the living conditions and the economic situation of blacks in the New World. It propagated pride in the blacks’ own skin colour and postulated a re-evaluation of the black race and its achievements. For Garvey, the term ‘Negro’ was not a term of abuse; the ‘New Negro’ who Garvey wanted to create should look upon his origins and descent with pride. Even today many of Garvey’s ideas still form the general foundation of Rastafarianism. Rastafarians agree with Garvey’s ultimate goal, that is the return of all men with black skin to their original homeland in Africa. [As mentioned earlier] For most Rastas, Garvey is a prophet who, similar to the biblical John the Baptist, herald their return of the new Messiah as Ras Tafari, Haile Selassie”¹⁰
3. “Pride in one’s own **skin colour and accentuation of the achievements of the black race** form the inspiration behind other portraits painted by Rastafari painters...
4. **The Bible** also occupies a central role for Jamaican Rastafarians.
5. **King Solomon** is an important figure. Why and where does this emphasis come from? “In chapter 1 of the Song of Songs [Song of Solomon] it is written ‘I am black and comely...’ and later ‘Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me’. For Rastas, these lines of Solomon describe skin colour and thus provide ‘proof’ of his race.¹¹ Moreover by virtue of the child that he had with the Queen of Sheba he is considered as the original father of the Ethiopian Royal house.”¹²
6. “Another frequently depicted figure is **King David**. Through his descendants, Haile Selassie, like Jesus Christ, considered himself to stem from the House of David. Moreover, David, due to his successful fight with Goliath symbolizes the victory of the weak over the strong, a further important Rasta motif. Moses, on the other hand, who plays an outstanding role in the traditions of American blacks, is...not a dominating figure in Rasta art. The reason for this is probably that Moses’ biblical role as someone who had been chosen to lead his people back to the Promised Land has been wholly transferred to Haile Selassie. Thus, for many Rastas, the Emperor of Ethiopia is not only the Messiah Returned but is also considered to be the reincarnation of the biblical Moses.”¹³
7. **The book of Revelation and its symbols**. “The most important book in the Bible for Rastafarians is...Revelation... This book promises the return of the Messiah and names his title: King of Kings, Lord of Lords. This however was one of the titles of the last Emperor of Ethiopia. Thus for Rastafarians all doubt is set aside: the new name of the Messiah Returned can only be Haile Selassie. The central importance of the Revelation for Rastas however is also explained from the entirety of this prophetic book. The victory of the powers of good over those of darkness, the fall of a sinful Babylon, the resurrection of a new, heavenly Jerusalem is promised in this book. The delivery from all evil, the re-establishment of just, godly circumstances on earth are the root of all Rastafarian thinking. Thus Rasta art and art handicrafts are full of allusions to motifs and symbols from the Revelation of St. John.”¹⁴

¹⁰ Bender, p. 4

¹¹ Note: There are a number of different ways that have been proposed in regard to interpreting Song of Solomon, one of the more popular ones taught by Phillips and others, is a “Dramatic” method of interpreting the book, often called the “*Shepherd Hypothesis*.” It proposes that there are actually 3 main persons in the book, Solomon, the Shulammitte (bride), and a third character, a simple shepherd boy. In this explanation, throughout the book Solomon repeatedly tries to woo the Shulammitte to become one of his wives, she resolutely and repeatedly refuses his advances, instead determining to stay true to her shepherd love. If that particular interpretation is correct, then the verses used by Rastas to “prove” that Solomon was black would not even refer to Solomon, but instead to the shepherd boy, invalidating the whole assertion of Rastafarianism. (see my “*Notes on the Song of Solomon*”, 2010 revised version, p. 4) –mwe

¹² Bender, p. 5

¹³ Bender, p. 5

¹⁴ Bender, p. 5

8. “**Africa itself, in the form of a normal map**, is a further important motif. “Scenes from Africa which are familiar from books or from television are just as frequently represented as the return of the abducted children to their lost homeland, the land of milk and honey.”¹⁵

9. “The means of transport for their return, **the Black Star Liner**, also appears in paintings. In 1919 Marcus Mosiah Garvey founded the Black Star Line in the USA, a shipping line which would encourage trade between Africans in the Old and New World and would cater for transport of those wanting to return to their old homeland. Economically the enterprise was a debacle, but from the point of view of propaganda and symbolism it was an unmitigated success. A shipping line operating completely under the ownership and management of blacks was a stirring idea which spread all the way to Africa. As a mark of respect for Marcus Garvey, the first independent land of Africa, that is Ghana, under Kwame Nkrumah, gave its own shipping line the name of Garvey’s company and included the black star in its national flag.”¹⁶

10. **Jamaican motifs and elements.** “Decorative elements...incorporated in Rasta art...include motifs from Jamaican surroundings, flowers, fruit, birds and the potent leaves of [the] marijuana bush called ‘ganja’ in Jamaica. These are mainly forms from nature, completely in accordance with the Rastafari idea in which natural good, created by God, is juxtaposed against unnatural evil made by man.”¹⁷

11. **The Lion.** “By far the most frequent motif in Rasta art however is the lion which is the emblem of the Rastafari and their heraldic figure so that we find lions in every shape and form and in every context. And for the Rastas themselves, the lion is considered as the African animal par excellence and as the king of all animals...the lion, for the Rasta, implies strength and might and is the symbol of primeval, frightening savageness. Because Haile Selassie amongst other names also called himself the Lion of Judah, the lion stands for the last Emperor of Ethiopia and symbolizes the Messiah. In...Revelation ...John ...describes the Messiah as a lamb sacrificed to save the world. In accordance with their own interpretation, the Rastas replace this lamb with a lion. It is often depicted with a flag on its back ...a posture which in traditional Christian devotional paintings also symbolizes a victorious, resurrected Jesus Christ who has overcome death. An identical motif is found as an emblem on the Imperial Ethiopian flag. It can be assumed that Rastas took this depiction of the lion from the flag.”¹⁸

12. **Written symbols.** “A wide variety of written symbols are used: King of Kings (K o K), Lord of Lords (L o L) and Lion of Judah, often with the adjunct ‘Conquering’ or the ‘Victorious’. Other popular symbols for Haile Selassie are King Daddy or King Alpha and Omega, King of the Beginning (A) & End (O) with the allusion to biblical symbolism. This title is sometimes also used to apply to the Ethiopian Imperial Couple. ‘His Imperial Majesty’ abbreviated to HIM (or the English ER), or the designation ‘Earth’s Rightful Ruler’ are self-explanatory...However by far the commonest name for the Emperor is ‘Jah’ or ‘God’ which derives from the Old Testament ‘Jahweh’ (Jehovah) [for Haile Selassie].¹⁹

SOME FAVORITE BIBLE PASSAGES OF THE RASTAFARIANS (Note: Titles are taken verbatim from the book “*Rastafarian Art*” by Wolfgang Bender, the passages selected by an individual named Alja Naliwaiko):

- “*The Holy Herb; Healing of the Nations*” – Genesis 1: 11, 29-30; Revelation 2:1, 2, 14
- “*The Nazarite Vow*” – Numbers 6:1-3, 5, 6, 8, 13
- “*God is a Black Man*” – Revelation 1:14-15
- “*A New Name Jah Got*” – Isaiah 62:2; Revelation 5:5; 19: 11-16; 22:13, 16
- “*Time of Tribulation and Repatriation*” – Genesis 15:13-14; Exodus 3:7-8; Ezekiel 36:24,26, 28; Psalm 68:31; 125:1-3; Jeremiah 23:2, 3, 5-6; Micah 4:1-4
- “*Man is the Head*” – Ephesians 5:22; I Corinthians 11:8-9; Deuteronomy 22:5
- “*Crave not for Riches nor Gold*” – I Timothy 6:6-12; Matthew 20:16
- “*Visions*” – Ezekiel 13:3; Colossians 2:8, 16-17
- “*God is Love*” – I John 4:4-8, 16
- “*The Fool turns Cornerstone*” – I Corinthians 4:10-13; Psalm 118:22

¹⁵ Bender, pp. 5-6

¹⁶ Bender, p. 6

¹⁷ Bender, p. 6

¹⁸ Bender, pp. 6-7

¹⁹ Bender, pp. 7-8

In addition to the above passages, Rastas trumpet any Old Testament verse which contains the word Ethiopia in it. However they are either not aware of, or else refuse to accept the fact that the “Ethiopia” mentioned in the Bible was not today’s Ethiopia. Rather, it is the territory in Africa located below Egypt, which today is named Sudan! For further documentation regarding that, consult chapter six, “*Why the Ethiopian Eunuch was not from Ethiopia*” in the book “*Africa and the Bible*” by Edwin Yamauchi. (see bibliography below)

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bender, Wolfgang. “*Rastafarian Art.*” (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, Jamaica, 1992, 2005).

Gebissa, Ezeiel (translator). Sellassie I, Haile “*My Life and Ethiopia’s Progress – Volume Two: Addis Abeba (sic) 1966 E.C.*” (Originally published by Michigan State University Press, 1994. Mass Market Paperback Edition by Research Associates School Times Publications: Chicago, Illinois, 1999).

Murrell, Nathaniel S. & Spencer, William D. “*Chanting Down Babylon*” (Ian Randle Publishers: Kingston, Jamaica, 1998)

Ullendorff, Edward (translator). Sellassie I, Haile. “*The Autobiography of Emperor Haile Sellassie I – Volume One: 1892-1937.*” (Research Associates School Times Publications: Chicago, Illinois, Vol. 1, 1999 –paperback edition)

Yamauchi, Edwin (editor). “*Africa and Africans in Antiquity.*” (Michigan State University Press: East Lansing, Michigan, 2001).

Yamauchi, Edwin. “*Africa and the Bible.*” (Baker Book House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2004).