

# CIS Bulletin: Rastafarians

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Gary Leazer, Ph. D.

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## Origin of Rastafarians

### Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia

The name of the sect comes from Ras Tafari Makonnen (1892-1975), the pre-coronation name of Haile Selassie I (Power of Trinity or Holy Trinity), emperor of Ethiopia (1930-1936, 1941-1974). Italian Facists controlled Ethiopia for 5 years while Selassie was in exile in England and Israel. "Ras" means "prince" and "Tafari" means "To be feared" or "Head Creator." However, Haile Selassie was never a Rastafarian; he was a devout Ethiopian Orthodox Christian his entire life.

Selassie was called the "Lion of Judah, Elect of God, Light of this World and King of Kings." He was reportedly the 225th heir to the throne going back 3,000 years to King Solomon. His ancestors are said to stem from the union between King Solomon and the black Ethiopian Queen of Sheba.

### Marcus Mosiah Garvey

Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940), a forerunner from Jamaica who played no part in organizing Rastafarianism, preached a "Back to Africa" message, using the theme "Africa for Africans" and "Look to Africa where a Black King shall be crowned and He shall lead you out of bondage."

Garvey believed Ethiopia was the site of the Garden of Eden. He interpreted Gen. 2:10ff as "A river went out of Eden and its name was Gihon and it compasseth the land of Ethiopia."

He took an apprenticeship as a printer and helped form Printers' Union in 1903, the first trade union in Jamaica. He soon began publishing a periodical called the *Watchman* to promote his political and journalistic beliefs. He read Booker T. Washington's (1856-1915) *Up from Slavery*, which influenced him greatly. He traveled to England where he met others who strongly supported African self-rule and the end to racial discrimination. Upon his return, he established the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in 1914 to improve Negro conditions on the Caribbean island nation. Its motto was "One God! One Aim! One Destiny!"



Marcus Mosiah Garvey

He published *The Negro World* in English, Spanish and French, a very influential black newspaper and the official voice of the UNIA from 1918 to 1933. It was succeeded by *The Black Man*, a



m o n t h l y m a g a z i n e published through the 1930s.

With American clergyman, Archbishop George A. McQuire (1866-1934), Garvey formed the African Orthodox Church which taught that each race must see God through its own racial eye. The Black Christ and the Black Madonna were officially announced at the UNIA convention in 1924.

Garvey started the Black Star Line, a shipping concern; the failure of this shipping line gave Garvey's enemies the opportunity to destroy him. He was convicted of using the U. S. Mail to defraud people in the sales of stock for his shipping line. He spent two years in the federal prison in Atlanta before being deported to Jamaica.

In his last years, living in England, he continued his social protest and his call for the liberation of Africa from colonial control. He died in England at the age of 53 on 10 June 1940.

At its peak in 1922-1924, Garvey had more than eight million followers. Not all blacks supported Garvey. One of his biggest critics was William Edward Burghardt (W. E. B.) Du Bois, an American black who helped form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Garvey had nothing to do with the beginning of Rastafari movement.

### The Beginnings of Rastafarians

Many poor Jamaicans believed Garvey's prediction of a black redeemer king in Africa was fulfilled in the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie I in Ethiopia. Haile Selassie took the titles of "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and King of the kings of Ethiopia."

A Rasta selling Ganga. Marijuana is illegal in Jamaica, but is openly sold and used at Nine Mile, the birthplace and burial site of Bob Marley.

Citing the Jewish Scriptures, many Jamaicans saw in Selassie's coronation, a coming judgment day when all the righteous would be called home to Mount Zion (or Africa) to live forever in peace and harmony.

Leonard Howell was an early leader of the movement in Jamaica. Howell established the first commune of Rastafarians and six principles of Rastafari which have changed little over the years: 1) a hatred for the white race, 2) the complete superiority of the black race, 3) revenge on the wickedness of white peoples, 4) the negation, persecution and humiliation of the government and legal bodies of Jamaica, 5) preparation to return to Africa, and 6) acknowledging Emperor Haile Selassie as the supreme being and only ruler of black people.

Even though he helped to shape the movement's ideas, Howell's arrest by the Jamaican government in 1933 for preaching a "revolutionary doctrine" is also thought to have been a large influence on the movement's organisational structure. Howell's prolonged harassment by the police is thought to be the reason Rastafarians have decided to remain leaderless.

In 1954 the situation grew increasingly tense as the Jamaican government intervened and destroyed the 500-acre Rastafarian mini-state called the Pinnacle that Howell ruled over. After this many followers migrated out of the original rural setting to the ghettos and slums of Kingston. Although authentic Elders advocate non-violence in their teachings, a frustrated and desperate few incited confrontation with authorities which resulted in deadly shoot-outs with British troops in the late '50s and early '60s bringing some negative worldwide attention to the movement.

### **Rastafari Teachings**

- For Rastafarians, the coronation of Haile Selassie as the King of Ethiopia is believed to be the fulfillment of Garvey's prophecy that a black ruler would rise in Africa to call all blacks to return to that continent. Rastafarians date their beginning from Haile Selassie's coronation in 1930.

Haile Selassie claimed he was a lineal descendant of King David & the 225<sup>th</sup> king extending from the Queen of Sheba. He said he was the Lion of Judah and that God, Jesus and Solomon were black.

His official titles, *King of kings*, *Lord of lords*, *Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah* and *Root of David*, are believed to be the titles of the returned Messiah in the New Testament Book of Revelation. The Rastafarian sect formed when founders became convinced that Haile Selassie was the Messiah, the Reincarnated Christ and God Incarnate. Hymns and poetry were written about Haile Selassie, prayers were offered to him, a theology developed around him.

Their belief in the incarnate divinity of Emperor Haile

Selassie began very shortly after his crowning. He did not personally believe the divine claims made of him by the Rastafarians, but was careful not to alienate Rastafarians.

When Haile Selassie visited Jamaica on 21 April 1966, somewhere between one and two hundred thousand Rastafarians from all over Jamaica descended on Norman Manley International Airport in Kingston, having heard that the man whom they considered to be God was coming to visit them. When Haile Selassie arrived at the airport, he refused to get off the airplane for an hour until Mortimer Planner, a well known Rasta, persuaded him that it was safe to do so. From then on the visit was a success.

Since Selassie's death, two views have arisen:

1. Reports of his death is confirmation of white man's lies and propaganda; Selassie is still alive.
2. Selassie is still alive, but his mortal body has disintegrated.

- Ethiopia is heaven. Anywhere else — the world of the white man — is considered Babylon; Jamaica is hell. Rastafarians reject most Christian doctrines, including idea that God is an invisible spirit and that heaven is "up there."

Hearing that Rastafarians desired to move to Ethiopia, Haile Selassie gave them land in 1948 in the community of Shashamane about 150 miles south of the Ethiopian capital.

Today, several hundred Rastas live around Shashamane. Although they believe Ethiopia is heaven, they complain that they have been unable to secure Ethiopian citizenship.

Rastas consider themselves Black Israelites. Salvation will come when all blacks move to Ethiopia.

- Bible, especially the Psalms, the prophetic books, hygienic codes of Leviticus and the Book of Revelation are used. Pork and shellfish are considered unclean and impure. Some Rastas are vegetarians, because a person is eating something dead when they eat meat. Hard liquor should be avoided; it is a tool of the white man to keep blacks in servitude. Beer is ok.

The *Kebra Negast: The Lost Bible of Rastafarian Wisdom and Faith from Ethiopia and Jamaica*, written around 1930 reflects Rastafarian thought and teachings not found in the original Kebra Negast. This revision is considered scripture by Rastafarians. This text must not be confused with another text with the same name, but with the subtitle, the Book of the Glory of the Kings.

Although not strictly speaking a Rastafari document, the *Holy Piby*, written by Robert Athlyi Rogers from Anguilla in the 1920s, is acclaimed by many Rastafarians as a primary source.

(Both of these texts can be read at [www.sacred-texts.com](http://www.sacred-texts.com).)

- Rastafarians are monotheists, worshipping one God whom they call Jah. Rastas see Jah as being in the form of the Holy Trinity, that is, God being God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

God or Jah the Holy Spirit lives within each Rastafarian; they sometimes refer to themselves as “I and I” to signify this belief. Some Rastafarians believe God was incarnated in the Person of Jesus Christ, but most believe the New Testament has been corrupted by Babylon.

- Most, but not all, wear beards and long hair twisted into locks called dreadlocks. They often wear colorful knit caps to cover their dreadlocks.

For Rastafarians, beards are a natural part of creation for men. Haile Selassie wore a beard. Beards help identify the man as a Rastafarian.

Rastafarians use Ex. 21:5 and Num. 6:5 as Biblical justification to avoid cutting their beard or hair.

Those who do not wear beards say they are difficult to keep clean and note that sometimes criminals wear beards to blame Rastas for their crimes.

Rastafarians wear dreadlocks because Ethiopian warriors wore their hair in this fashion. The dreadlock looks like a lion’s mane – Haile Selassie is the Lion of Judah. It is a “crown of glory.” It looks like a fully ripe marijuana plant. Some Rastafarians believe the word “dread” causes non-Rastas to react with fear at their sight.

The wearing of beards and dreadlocks has been an issue for inmates serving sentences in U. S. prisons. The courts generally side with the prison’s grooming code that hair must be neatly cut and must be cut above the shirt collar and around the ears.”

Beards, goatees and long sideburns are not allowed in most U. S. prisons. Failure to comply with the grooming codes generally means the inmate is placed in segregation cells apart from the regular prison population.

A Rastafari inmate in Virginia has spent the past ten years in a segregation cell because he will not shave his beard or dreadlocks. He is allowed out of his cell one hour per day to take a shower; otherwise, he remains locked in his cell by himself. At one prison in Virginia, ten Rastafarians were locked in segregation cells in February 2003 because they would not cut their beards or hair.

For Rastafarians, the razor, the scissors and the comb are three Babylonian inventions

- Marijuana, called Ganga by Rastafarians and referred to as the “holy herb” or “wisdom weed,” is used for religious rituals. It is smoked, used to make tea, and soaked in rum.

Biblical texts used to support the smoking of marijuana include Gen. 1:11, 29; Ps. 104:14; Prov.

15:17; and Rev. 22:2. Rastafarians also refer to the Patriarchs (Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses) “burning incense before the Lord” as justification.

Some Rastas smoke marijuana as often as some Americans smoke cigarettes; others are Rastas so they can smoke marijuana, which was my observation while at Nine Mile. Some Rastas reportedly do not use marijuana.

Smoking marijuana in the United States and Jamaica (although it is tolerated around Nine Mile) is illegal. The U. S. Attorney General ruled as recently as 1998 that Rastafarians may not use marijuana. However, the Italian Supreme Court ruled in 2008 that Rastas may use marijuana in Italy.

- Rasta colors are gold, green and red. Red is said to signify the blood of martyrs and judgment on Babylon (whites), green the vegetation and beauty of Africa or peace and forgiveness (Green also reminds a Rasta of the marijuana plant), and gold the wealth of Africa or of Ethiopia.

- Meetings may be held weekly and often outdoors. Themes stressed at meetings: Whites are wicked and inferior to blacks. Blacks were exiled to Jamaica (hell) for their transgressions. Blacks must return to Ethiopia. Haile Selassie is the Living God. “Jah,” a shortened word for Jehovah or Yahweh, is used of Haile Selassie. “One God! One Aim! One Destiny” is voiced at every meeting. “Peace and Love” is often repeated motto.

Some important dates are:

January 7 – Eastern Orthodox Christmas

March 25 - The birthday of Empress Menen

April 21 – The anniversary of Haile Selassie’s visit to Jamaica. Also known as Groundation Day.

May 25 - African Liberation Day

July 23 – The birthday of Emperor Haile Selassie

August 17 – The birthday of Marcus Garvey

September 11 – Ethiopian New Year

November 2 – The coronation of Haile Selassie; babies are often dedicated to Haile Selassie on this day.

- Street meetings for the purpose of gaining converts are sometimes held. Photographs of Haile Selassie with large gold, green and red flags are used to attract listeners.

- Organizations include the Ethiopian World Federation; African Reform Church of God in Christ; United Afro-West Indian Federation; United Ethiopian Body; Ethiopian Youth Cosmic Faith; Ethiopian Coptic League; African Cultural League; and United Rastas of Jamaica

- Rastafarians are said to number one million worldwide, but this is a wild guess.

— Some of this material comes from the US Army, Office of the Chief of Chaplains, 01 January 1976



A Jamaican bus like the one I took to Nine Mile in 2005. When I asked the guide if the bus was air-conditioned. He said yes, just open the windows. (All of the photos in this bulletin, except for the photo of Marcus Garvey, were taken by Prof. Leazer in 2005.)

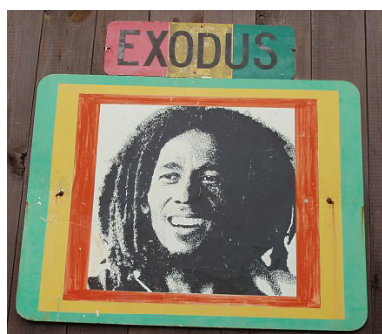
Bob Marley was born in the small village of Nine Mile in Saint Ann Parish, Jamaica as Nesta Robert Marley 06 February 1945. A Jamaican passport official would later swap his first and middle names.

By 1959, Marley was sitting in on jam sessions in his spare time. He recorded his first two singles in 1962. By 1973, Bob Marley and the Wailers were an international hit with songs such as "I Shot the Sheriff," "Exodus," "Jamming," and "One Love."

In 1966, Marley married Cuban-born Alpharita "Rita" Anderson, (probably to make it easier for her to move to the U. S.), and moved near his mother's residence in Wilmington, Delaware, in the United States for a short time, during which he worked as a DuPont lab assistant and on the assembly line at a Chrysler plant, under the alias Donald Marley.

Rita became involved in the Rastafarian Movement and encouraged Marley to consider the sect after Selassie visited Jamaica in 1966. Her bio says she is an active member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church; she reportedly lives in Ghana.

In July 1977, Marley was found to have a form of malignant melanoma, from a wound reportedly picked up in a friendly football match. He fought the cancer for eight months, but it quickly spread throughout his body. While flying home from Germany to Jamaica for the last



time, Marley's vital functions worsened. After landing in Miami, he was taken to a hospital for immediate medical attention. He died at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital in Miami on the morning of May 11, 1981, at the age of 36. The



Our Rasta guide using a rock as a pillow inside Bob Marley's compound at Nine Mile, a practice he said, was Marley's.

## Bob Marley

spread of melanoma to his lungs and brain caused his death. His final words to his son David "Ziggy" were "Money can't buy life."

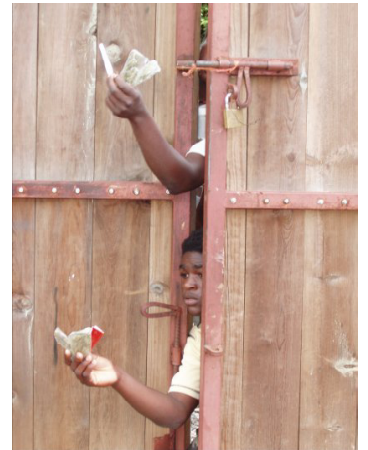
In 1994 Marley was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, and in 1999, *Time* magazine chose Bob Marley & The Wailers' *Exodus*, which he recorded while living in England, as the greatest album of the 20th century.

Rita Marley caused a major controversy in Jamaica in 2005 when she announced plans to have the body of her late husband exhumed and buried in Ethiopia, his "spiritual resting place." She wanted it to be a month long celebration to celebrate what would be his 60th birthday. Jamaicans, including Marley's mother who lived in Miami, rose up in protest and the idea was quickly dropped.

Nine Mile, where Marley is buried, is a popular tourist site and hosts a large reggae event each year.

I visited Nine Mile several years ago while in Jamaica. Although smoking marijuana is illegal in Jamaica, it is openly tolerated at Nine Mile. As our tour bus pulled to a stop at the shrine where Marley is buried, six or eight boys and men suddenly appeared holding handfuls of marijuana cigarettes for sale to the tourists.

Marley remains the most widely known and revered performer of reggae music, and is credited for helping spread both Jamaican music and the Rastafarian movement to a worldwide audience.



Young Jamaicans trying to sell Marijuana through the gate surrounding the Bob Marley compound at Nine Mile.

