

What is Rastafarianism?

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I must preface this document by saying some things up front. I have no personal grievances with people who are; Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Charismatic, in various denomination churches, ecumenical, etc. I have found that such are no worse or better than any who hold to other spiritual persuasions—including those of my own. In fact, I have friends and acquaintances with many who are in some of the afore mentioned groups—and even more. My focus of attention is directed toward postulated 'Christian' perspectives and teachings that run contrary to what I believe is Biblical. There may be times when I will address the questionable practices and activities of various individuals who have made claims to being Christians, but I will not engage in attacking individuals character.

Rastafarianism is much more than an African Hippie movement. It is also a religion that has roots that go back to Jamaica and the 1930s. Rastafarians believe the Messiah is Haile Selassie (hay' -lee s« -lah' -see), the last emperor of Ethiopia. As emperor, Selassie was actually called "Ras Tafari." One of the outgrowths of Rastafarianism is its heavy influence in Raggae music, which was made popular and gained worldwide recognition through the late Bob Marley. According to 1995 statistics, Rastafarianism had some 180,000 adherents worldwide.¹ A documentary I saw a year or two ago showed how Rastafarianism was rapidly growing among people of all cultural and ancestral backgrounds.

Early Rastafarians considered Selassie the living God who fulfilled a prophecy of Marcus Garvey. In the early 1900s, Garvey was an American Black Nationalist who tried to form a "back to Africa movement." He hoped this would culminate in the establishment of an independent African country made up of Americans who have African ancestry. Garvey's prophecy reportedly said, "Look to Africa, where a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near."²

Those who heeded Garvey's words and looked to Selassie—or rather "Ras Tafari"—withdrew from mainline Jamaican society. They also deemed traditional Christianity to be "white religion"—and rejected it as such. They also rejected Western culture because they considered it to be the modern "Babylon." Some Rastafarians also adopted ganja (i.e., marijuana) as their sacred "herb." Some Rasta extremists also turned to acts of violence to further their goals.³

My personal investigation has revealed that Rastafarians consider smoking the "Holy Herb" to being filled with the Holy Spirit. The ancient Greeks and Romans held to similar concepts. They sought alcoholic intoxication at the Bacchanalian Festivals in order to become possessed by Bacchus (Roman) or Dionysius (Greek)—the god of wine, revelry, orgies, and ecstasy. Likewise, American Indians took peyote or mescaline while Timothy Leary took LSD to reach "spiritual highs." However, Paul stressed being "filled with the Holy Spirit" in contrast to the contemporary and ungodly religious practices of his day by saying;

¹⁸And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess (literally "unsavedness"); but be filled with the Spirit; ¹⁹Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; (Ephesians 5:18–19)

Rastafarians regard Africa—Ethiopia in particular—as the "Promised Land" of Moses.⁴ They also view themselves as the true descendants of David and children of God as defined by the Old Testament. This may be partially due to the traditional belief, that in the 10th century B.C., the kingdom of Ethiopia was supposedly founded by Menelik I. Accordingly, Menelik was Solomon's first son who was conceived by the Queen of Sheba.⁵ This supposedly occurred when his mother visited Solomon in Israel. Before she left Israel, 1 Kings 10:13 reports how, ". . . king Solomon gave unto the queen of Sheba all her desire, whatsoever she asked, beside that which Solomon gave her of his royal bounty. So she turned and went to her own country, she and her servants." Some have suggested by interpolation that her "desire" was also to conceive a son by Solomon, the wisest man in the world.

This tradition has some respected acceptance as demonstrated by the 1984 and 1991 airlifts of thousands of Ethiopian "Falashas" to Israel. Upon arrival they were given full citizenship and privileges. This is usually granted only to those who can prove their Jewish ancestry.

Many rigorous adherents of Rastafarianism seek to follow the law of Moses and are strict vegetarians who actually shun alcohol—the leavened fruit of the vine. They have also adopted the "Star of David" and the "Lion of Judah" as key religious symbols of identity.

Rastafarians usually focus on the following for biblical authority:

⁴I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon to them that know me: behold Philistia, and Tyre, **with Ethiopia; this man was born there.** ⁵**And of Zion it shall be said, This and that man was born in her:** and the highest himself shall establish her. ⁶The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, that this man was born there. (Psalm 87:4–6) [emphasis mine]

Rastafarians argue that Psalm 87:4 is a prophetic reference to Haile Selassie being born in Ethiopia as the Messiah. Yet, they have ignored the basic grammatical structure of the overall passage.

Psalm 87 speaks of the love the Lord has for Zion (Jerusalem) and its inhabitants. However, the Lord also inspired David to write about a day in which all people would know the Lord and acknowledge Him as such. The Lord then directs His attention to Rahab (Egypt) and Babylon (modern Iraq). He then says He will also speak of them as being among those who will also know the Lord.

The Lord then refers to another group who would one day also know Him. This one consisted of Philistia (southwest Palestine), Tyre (ancient Phoenicia, which is modern Syria and Lebanon), and Ethiopia. Ethiopia is not singled out, but actually included in the group. It is to this group that He will also acknowledge some singled out from those

regions as knowing Him. Verse 4 indicates this by literally saying, ". . . this one he was born there."(The is the actual Hebrew rendering.)

The prophecy then focuses on Zion and acknowledges that many there will also know the Lord. This is so indicated by His stating, "This and that man was born in her . . ." Thus, the Psalmist was not pointing to any one particular individual as the coming Messiah. That interpretation would indicate there would be a Messiah from each region mentioned in the Psalm as a whole!

The Psalm was actually referring to a day in which people from every nation and all families would gather in Jerusalem and acknowledge Yahweh (Jehovah) as their Lord. That is why verse six adds, "The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, that this man was born there." Bearing in mind that italicized words were added by the translators to hopefully clarify the passage, this verse could actually read, "The LORD shall count, when he writeth up the people, this [each one singled out] was born there."

The Rastafarians have not only misinterpreted Psalm 87, they have also overlooked the other Scriptural references to the bodily return of the Messiah. (This is referring to the Lord's coming at Armageddon—not the "catching away" to take place at least seven years earlier.) These passages indicate the Messiah will return to Earth at the Mount of Olives—not Ethiopia! One such passage is found in Zechariah:

¹Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, and thy spoil shall be divided in the midst of thee. ²For I will gather all nations against Jerusalem to battle; and the city shall be taken, and the houses rifled, and the women ravished; and half of the city shall go forth into captivity, and the residue of the people shall not be cut off from the city. ³Then shall the LORD go forth, and fight against those nations, as when he fought in the day of battle. ⁴And his feet shall stand in that day upon the mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem on the east, and the mount of Olives shall cleave in the midst thereof toward the east and toward the west, and there shall be a very great valley; and half of the mountain shall remove toward the north, and half of it toward the south. (Zechariah 14:1–4) [Emphasis mine. Also see Acts 1:9–12]

Not only does the Bible indicate the Messiah will bodily return to the Mount of Olives, it also indicates He will be recognized by the visible stigmata (i.e., the visible marks) of His crucifixion;

¹⁰And I will pour upon the house of David, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the spirit of grace and of supplications: and they shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn. (Zechariah 12:10) [Emphasis mine. Also see Revelation 1:7]

Lastly, the distinctive Rastafarian hairstyle that incorporates long dreadlocks often give the "Rastaman" an unscrupulous and ferocious appearance. As a result, many remain leery and respond negatively toward them even though many are honest, hardworking,

family oriented, and charitable. I have also discovered that some of them are not racists as many of those were in the early stages of the movement.

Unfortunately, many Rastafarians are violently antagonistic toward the Gospel! In June of 1992, my family and I personally discovered this when we preached in the Village of Windward for the first time. There were two Rastafarians present who immediately made their hatred for our message known. If there was ever a time I experienced fear for the cause of Christ, that was it! However, God is faithful and we now have a good relationship with these same men—and also many other Roman Catholics in the village as well. PTL! Please pray for us as we continue to reach out to Rastafarians with the Gospel.

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Footnotes

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² The People's Chronology, Licensed from Henry Holt and Company, Inc. Copyright © 1994 by James Trager. All rights reserved.

³ Ibid.

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⁵ The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia.