

STATEMENT DR500

Witnessing to Rastafarians (Part One: Background)

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The word “Rastafarianism” often calls to mind the stereotypical images of dreadlocks (long braids or natural locks of hair), ganja (marijuana), the streets of Kingston, Jamaica, and the reggae rhythms of Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Bunny Wailer. But, according to William David Spencer, coeditor of *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Temple University, 1998), and author of the forthcoming *Dread Jesus* (SPCK), all or none of these elements may apply to the religious reality of individual Rastafarians, as Rastas may also shave their heads, eschew marijuana, and live in a locale far removed from Jamaica.

“Rastafarianism is decentralized,” notes Spencer, “so there is nothing that defines (in toto) what Rastafarianism is. There are no universally acknowledged leaders, no universally agreed-upon defining principles. It is a black consciousness movement — Afro-Caribbean — and there is a bifurcation between the religion and its accompanying social consciousness so people can appreciate what Rastas are trying to do socially while not embracing the religion.”¹

The movement “has been recognized not only as one of the most popular Afro-Caribbean religions of the late twentieth century, gaining even more popularity than Voodoo, but also as one of the leading cultural trends in the world.... A June 1997 estimate puts the number of practicing Rastafarians worldwide at one million, with more than twice that number of sympathizers and many million more reggae fans.”²

The movement takes its name from the title “Ras Tafari.” In the Ethiopian (Amharic) language, *ras* means “head,” “prince,” or “field marshal,” and *tafari* means “to be feared.”³ Within the system of Rastafarianism, the term is a reference most particularly to Ras Tafari Makonnen (1892–1975), who became the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I (his Christian baptismal name) upon his coronation in 1930.

One essayist from Jamaica, Seretha Rycenssa, defines a “true Rasta” as “one who believes in the deity of the Ethiopian monarch’... sees black liberationist Marcus Mosiah Garvey as his prophet... sticks to [his] path, does not shave, cut or straighten the hair, rejects the customs of ‘Babylon society’ [which refers to political and economic domination and cultural imperialism], and ‘looks on his blackness and sees that it is good and struggles to preserve it.’”⁴ While Spencer would challenge the universality of much of this definition, he would agree that Rycenssa’s characterization is certainly accurate for much of Rastafarianism.

Spencer notes that Rastafarianism traces its roots to the Ethiopian consciousness movement in the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This popular front involved a looking back to Africa as the “motherland” and a focus on the biblical promise that out of Africa would come princes: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God” (Ps. 68:31; KJV). Spencer asserts, “Lots of folks started saying they were the Promised One including (the self-styled) Prince Thomas Makarooroo, Prince Shrevington Mitcheline, and the Prophet Bedward. All failed.”

Then Marcus Garvey, a devout Christian, came along in the 1920s, promoting an Afrocentric view of life that incorporated the decolonization of Africa and a “Back to Africa” resettlement movement. Garvey also sought to bring a black alternative to dominant Eurocentric interpretations of Scripture. Many view him as “a forerunner of Haile Selassie [and] Rastas regard Garvey as a prophet in the same light as the biblical John the Baptist,”⁵ even though Garvey challenged the view of Selassie as divine and disavowed association with Rastafarianism when it emerged in 1930.

In that year, on November 2, Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned emperor of Ethiopia and was lauded with the titles: “Lion of Judah, Elect of God, King of Kings” (see Rev. 5:5; 19:16). “This sent a shock wave through Afro-Caribbean culture,” Spencer says. “In the streets of Kingston, Jamaica, preachers like Joseph Hibbert, started declaring that he (Haile Selassie I) was the long awaited Messiah, the second coming of Christ.”

Thus was born one track of Rastafari, that looked to Selassie as the living God and black messiah who would overthrow the existing order and usher in a reign of blacks. Selassie rejected this worship and denied that he was divine. Yet, despite his denials, when Selassie died in 1975, some Rastafarians viewed the event as a “disappearance,” and the movement only gained in influence and popularity as it capitalized on the elements of mythmaking and mystery. Nevertheless, this “disappearance” precipitated some changes in Rastafarian theology (“Rastology”). Nathaniel Samuel Murrell writes:

For example, brethren have reinterpreted the doctrine of repatriation as voluntary migration to Africa, returning to Africa culturally and symbolically, or rejecting Western values and preserving African roots and black pride. The idea that the ‘white man is evil’ has become less prominent in later Rastafarian thought, and the concept of Babylon has broadened to include all oppressive and corrupt systems of the world... [Also] under the influence of some articulate sistren... many brethren and Rasta camps have had to reevaluate their patriarchal view of sexuality. Rastafari sistren are becoming more vocal and active in the movement, especially in the Twelve Tribes of Israel [one of the largest and most influential groups in Rastafari].⁶

Through the messianic track has continued to focus on Selassie as the second coming of Jesus, the Twelve Tribes sect⁷ has moved in a more biblical direction in recent years. The more these followers have delved into Selassie’s writings and examined his life, the more they have come to realize that he was a follower of Jesus. Spencer insists that the best opportunity for evangelism is with such people and that the work involves “moving them from worshipping Haile Selassie as God to worshipping Haile Selassie’s God: Jesus”

There is one particularly hopeful sign found within the Twelve Tribes. For many years, this sect — founded by Vernon Carrington, the ‘Prophet Gad’ — held to the belief that Selassie was Jesus Christ returned. But, on July 13, 1997, in his first public interview over IRIE-FM, the largest independent reggae radio station in Jamaica, the Prophet Gad declared that the movement had shifted to faith in Jesus Christ. Gad declared, in the distinctive Jamaican patois, “Christ is to return and sit on the throne of David... Christ the same yesterday, today and forever. And even after his majesty say, him saved not by the man character but by the blood of Jesus Christ.”⁸

Spencer says most members of the Twelve Tribes still believe Haile Selassie was at least a prophet, but “the better followers they are of Haile Selassie (Selassian Christians), the better Christians they are. There is one catch here, however: the emperor was a member of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church which holds to monophysitism (*mono physis*, one nature) — believing that Jesus’ humanity was filtered or subsumed through His divinity. They believe His divinity takes precedence so they are Nicean but not Chalcedonian. Thus, it is important to keep the movement going past Selassie.”

Spencer notes another track that has sprung up alongside the messianic track. This Rastafarian group traces its roots to Leonard Percival Howell and has definite Hindu elements. Some time in the early to mid 1930s, Howell produced a 14-page pamphlet, *The Promised Key*, in which he posited Haile Selassie I as an appearance of God the Father. Spencer claims this laid the groundwork for a second track within Rastafarianism that is more “Hindu-influenced with lots of Rosicrucianism in it. A lot of the leaders in this track have also been Masons.” The result has been a sort of Rastafarian pantheism that looks for “the Lion Spirit in each of us: the Christ spirit.”

In 1973, Joseph Owens, one of the first nonblack scholars to pursue ethnographic research among the Rastas in Jamaica, published a summary of Rastafarian theology as he saw it. These points included, as summarized by Nathaniel Samuel Murrell: the belief that “God is man and man is God” (as evidenced in the pantheistic track); that “salvation is earthly... that human beings are called to celebrate and protect life... that the spoken word as a manifestation of the divine presence and power can [both] create and bring destruction... that sin is both personal and corporate... [and that Rasta] brethren are the chosen people of Jah to manifest God’s power and promote peace in the world.”⁹

Though Rastas may differ in their religious beliefs and through scholars may differ in their views on what Rastas believe, all Rastas are in agreement as to the Babylonian nature of life in the African diaspora, and all declare their psychological and cultural rejection of the values and institutions of Babylon. In “reasoning sessions” (through

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which Rastology and philosophy is debated), in the lyrics of reggae music, and in the “livity” (the Rasta lifestyle of healthy dietary practices, preservation of the environment, adherence to doctrinal teachings and ceremonial practices), Rastafarians seek to grow in “I-ness” or “somebodiness,” that is, in self-confidence.

“I-ness” is an important concept in Rastafarianism wherein “iration” is a synonym for creation or production; “i-sssembly” is a meeting of Rastas for reasoning and “groundation”; “itations” are meditations and reflections on life in contemporary society; and “iyaric” is dread talk that favors the use of “I.”

Rastafarianism is not a reform Christian movement. Nor is it a Christian or an African traditional religion. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell concludes:

[It is] a different kind of religious species among New World (if not New Age) or nontraditional religions, one that is distinctly Caribbean. Like its antecedents within the Africa diaspora... Rastafari is a modern Afro Caribbean cultural phenomenon that combines concepts from African culture and the “Caribbean experience” (social, historical, religious and economic realities) with Judeo-Christian thought into a new sociopolitical and religious worldview. So while Rastafarian beliefs and practices are influenced by such Africanisms in Jamaican culture, Rastafari’s rise and ethos are driven by social, economic, and political forces in the region.¹⁰

The significance of these theological, sociological, and psychological distinctives will become clear in Part Two as we consider how to effectively share the Christian gospel with Rastas.

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1. William David Spencer, personal interview, 13 April 1999. All quotes from Spencer are taken from this interview. Spencer’s forthcoming *Dread Jesus* will provide an extensive study of the place of Jesus Christ in Rastafari.
 2. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, “Introduction: The Rastafari Phenomenon,” *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer, and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1998), 1.
 3. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3d ed.
 4. Murrell, 2.
 5. Clinton Hutton and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, “Rastas Psychology of Blackness, Resistance and Somebodiness,” *Chanting*, 43.
 6. Murrell, “Introduction: The Rastafari Phenomenon,” *Chanting*, 6.
 7. Most Rastafarian intellectuals have been involved within this expression of Rastafarianism, which included the late reggae musician Robert Nesta “Bob” Marley.
 8. Messian Dread, trans., “The Beloved Prophet Gad,” inter. Andrea Williams, IRIE-FM, Jamaica, 13 July 1997.
 9. Murrell, “Introduction,” 5-6. Note: Rastafarianism has a weak theology of death. In Part Two, we will consider how this provides an opening for the Christian gospel.
 10. *Ibid.*, 4.