The general impression that many people have of Rastafarianism is of a group of Rastas swaying to the pulsing rhythm of reggae music while passing along a marijuana (ganja) cigarette. Essentially, however, Rastafarianism is a complex mixture of ancient and modern religion, myths, philosophies and political ideals.

Antique roots

Eden and Ethiopia

Some Rastafarian groups support Ethiopianism that, among other things, claims that Ethiopia was part of the Biblical Garden of Eden and that the Ethiopians outside Africa are the 'lost tribes of Israel'. They believe that the River Gihon, one of the rivers flowing from the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2: 13), flows through Ethiopia and that this is proof that Ethiopia was part of the Biblical Eden. According to them, the entire continent of Africa was once known as Ethiopia. The blacks living there had a highly developed culture, and civilisation spread from there along the Nile to, inter alia, Egypt, Greece and Rome.

Alleged Biblical links

The various Biblical references to Ethiopia are used to substantiate an ancient link between Israel and Ethiopia. In Genesis (chapter 49: 8-12) God declares that he will entrust the supremacy over his kingdom to the tribe of Judah.

Psalm 89 mentions that God made a covenant with King David (from the tribe of Judah) according to which he made David "... the most exalted of the kings of the earth (.27 ) whose throne will endure "as long as the heavens endure" (.29).

After the visit by the Queen of Sheba to David's son and successor, King Solomon (1 Kings 10), a son was born to them - Menelik I. The Ark of the Covenant (Exodus 37: 1-9) was later also sent to Ethiopia together with twelve thousand noblemen and priests from Israel, where the kingdom of God has since then been located under David's descendant, Menelik I. This view is supported by some people in the Orthodox church of Ethiopia.

Divine punishment

Because the people of this kingdom disobeyed God at some stage, he allowed as many as a hundred million of them to be borne away as slaves by European and Arab slave traders. In Ezekiel 37, Isaiah 43 and Jeremiah 23 and 33 he promises that if these exiles converted to him once more,
he would provide someone from the progeny of David and Solomon (the tribe of Judah) to restore his kingdom on earth and to be a "light to the world".

**African redeemer prophesied**

In 1920 Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican by birth and founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), attracted global attention with his 'back to Africa' movement for blacks. Garvey encouraged blacks to be proud of who they are and become independent of white supremacy. The development of the black awareness movement and civil protest movement in the USA was a direct result of Garvey's work.

**Crowning in Ethiopia**

In a speech Garvey declared: "Look to Africa, for the crowning of a black king, he shall be the Redeemer." A few years later, on 2 November 1930, Ras Tafari Makonnen was crowned as king of Ethiopia. He gave himself the title of Emperor Haile Selassie (Power of the Trinity) I, Conquering Lion from the Tribe of Judah and King of the kings of Ethiopia.
Selassie’s crowning was immediately regarded as the fulfillment of Garvey’s prediction about the black king, and can in a certain sense be viewed as the official start of the Rastafarian religion. Rastafarians amended the title somewhat and refer to him as His Majesty Kaiser Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion from the Tribe of Judah, Elected One of God, Light of the World, King of Zion.

Garvey not a believer

Garvey, who besides Selassie, is today still regarded as the main figure in the Rastafarian faith, was never a Rastafarian himself. He even criticised Selassie in public because slavery was allegedly still being practised in Ethiopia, and least of all saw him as the redeemer. Garvey continued with his upliftment work among blacks until his death in London (1940), after which his body was returned to his land of birth, Jamaica.

Selassie not a believer either

Although Rastafarians regard Haile Selassie as the embodiment of the living redeemer of the black race, Selassie himself apparently was not impressed with this following. He was a dedicated Christian who even on occasion refused to speak to visiting Rastafarians from Jamaica at his palace.

Political career

Selassie was born near Härer, Ethiopia, on 23 July 1892 and baptised in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church as Ras Tafari Makonnen. He was a second cousin of the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik II, and with his help the emperor’s successor, Lij Iyasu, was overthrown in 1916 and replaced by Zauditu, the emperor’s daughter. On Zauditu’s death in 1930, Selassie, who had in the meantime became her chief executive, succeeded her and became emperor.

In 1931 Selassie approved a constitution according to which Ethiopia’s first parliament and legal system were established. In 1936 Selassie fled to England in temporary exile after Italy had invaded his country the previous year. With Britain’s assistance Italy was later defeated, and Selassie returned in 1942 to rule his country. He was later responsible for, inter alia, extensive land reforms, the abolishment of slavery (1942) and the further expansion of Ethiopia’s constitution (1955).

Attempts to overthrow Selassie’s government in 1960 were successfully stopped, but by 1974 a combination of factors, such as corruption in the government, poor management, drought, inflation and famine, caused Selassie to lose the majority of his people’s support. He was forced to abdicate his throne and died in Addis Ababa on 27 August 1975.
God on earth
Although Selassie rejected his alleged divinity and Rastafarianism and although he was barely able to rule his earthly kingdom, to most Rastafarians, he was still Jah on earth or at least the promised embodiment of Jah on earth.

They claimed that he was the 225th king in the royal house of Solomon, and that he consequently represented the oldest throne on earth. According to Rastafarians, this throne is three thousand years old (much older than the British royal house’s approximately five hundred years), and Ethiopia is also the only country in Africa to successfully combat colonialism. The crowning of Selassie was therefore a fulfillment of God’s promise to King David.

Classical period
In the period between 1930 and the early 1960s, known as the ‘classical period’, Rastafarianism was a Jamaican religious movement with little influence from or to the outside world.

Communities in nature
As is still the case today, many Rastafarians lived in nature outside the cities in camps or villages under the authority of an elder. Some camps were similar to monasteries, with men and women living separately. The appearance and organisation of others were again similar to those of small villages in West Africa.
Life in the camps was simple, with ital food prepared by the women, and the ritual smoking of ganja to achieve the right spiritual level of consciousness. Initially the dreadlocks were worn only by those who had taken the Nazirite vow (Numbers 6:2-8), but they later became popular among other Rastas too.

Influence of Ethiopian Orthodox Church

Another very interesting development occurred in Jamaica during this period as well. The Ethiopian World Foundation (EWF), which had earlier been established by the Selassie government and had close ties with the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, started a branch on the island. This branch of the EWF was quickly ‘hi-jacked’ by the Rastafarians, and in the subsequent interaction between the two groups orthodox Rastafarianism was officially established.

At about the same time the Ethiopian Orthodox Church was also established in Jamaica, and although all Rastafarians did not accept the orthodox views, they were all affected by them to a greater or lesser extent.

Exodus to Ethiopia

The one thing about which all Rastafarians agreed, was that Haile Selassie was ‘divine’ and that he would help blacks all over the world to return to Africa (Ethiopia). Although some preached a mystical interpretation of the return to Africa after Selassie’s death, the Rastas in the beginning all expected to immigrate to Africa themselves. This expectation gave Rastafarianism a political dimension similar to that of Zionism.
By the Sixties Rastafarianism had grown considerably in Jamaica and the Caribbean Islands and the ideal to return to Africa still looked theoretically quite possible to most Rastas. While political revolutionaries in the rest of the world clamoured for 'power to the people', 'let my people go' became the Rasta slogan.

Violence in Jamaica

In the late Fifties and Sixties some Rastafarians, in frustration because the exodus to Africa was not taking place, abandoned the Rastafarian principles of non-violence and became involved in various shootouts with British troops in Jamaica.

Although these incidents forced the outside world to take cognisance of the religion and its objectives, it also gave Rastafarianism a very negative image worldwide. However, Rastafarianism would regain its stature as a non-violent and peace-loving doctrine before the end of the decade with the advent of its new 'prophet' - Bob Marley (also see article “Bob Marley – Reggae Prophet”).

“Grounation day”

The growth of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in Jamaica led to Haile Selassie arriving on the island on 21 April 1966 for an official visit. Since then this day has been celebrated as a special holiday, Grounation day, by Rastafarians.

Different accounts of Selassie’s impression of the Rastafarians during his visit exist.

He did on occasion have talks with a group of Rasta elders, but again there are different accounts of what was discussed during this historic meeting. Most versions agree that Selassie (possibly fearing a mass emigration to Ethiopia) proposed to the elders to ‘build up’ Jamaica first. Thus Selassie, or Jah to his followers, to a great extent dampened many Rastas’ enthusiasm for immigrating to Ethiopia as quickly as possible.
Rastafarians today

Rastafarian groups

Most Rastafarians today are not very insistent on the finer details of the doctrines of their religion. They believe in the basic doctrines of Rastafarianism, but do not necessarily belong to a specific organised group or order. However, there are a few organised Rastafarian groups that can be taken cognisance of.

The Twelve Tribes of Israel (not related to the black Hebrew group with the same name) is probably the biggest. This group believes that Haile Selassie is actually Jesus Christ who returned to earth. The Second Coming has therefore already occurred.

Followers of ‘Prince’ Edward Emmanuel, who claims that he is one of the divine trinity, together with Haile Selassie and Marcus Garvey, are perhaps the most organised. The doctrines of this group, its priest rankings and liturgy are clearly defined and they lead a monastic existence with strong orthodox characteristics.

The Zion Coptic Church experienced a revival in the Sixties when white hippies converted to Rastafarianism. This group regards itself as a legal Orthodox Church that has adopted certain aspects of the classic Rastafarian culture. Some of the group’s doctrines border on Gnosticism. Members of the Zion Coptic Church are sometimes criticised because some of them, although they still wear dreadlocks and smoke ganja, are also financially prosperous and are allegedly the biggest landowners in Jamaica.

Conclusion

It is estimated that there are currently between two hundred thousand and seven hundred thousand Rastafarians worldwide. Because Rastafarians do not have official church buildings or temples, or an official Rastafarian publication or an official organisational structure, it is difficult to determine exactly how accurate this figure is.
The country with the biggest number of Rastafarians is Jamaica, where about a hundred thousand of the population of approximately three million people officially practise the Rastafarian religion. Rastafarianism in Jamaica is still growing, but claims that six in every ten Jamaicans are Rastafarians, are quite exaggerated.

There are also branches of the religion in England, Canada, the Caribbean Islands and America. Rastafarians are found in most countries, also in most African countries and in South Africa. Today there are even whites who regard themselves as Rastafarians and follow the Rasta lifestyle.

**Conclusion**

Theologically, Rastafarianism is bankrupt. None of the prophesies regarding the return of the black diaspora to Ethiopia even nearly came true. Haile Selasse I, the proposed “God” incarnate of Rastafarianism, not only rejected the religion but also rejected his supposed divinity.

Claims regarding Rastafarianisms’s Biblical roots and links are totally unfounded and both historically and theologically inaccurate.

Even to most Rastafarians the initially strong political ideals of their religion, including the return of blacks to Ethiopia, are no longer so important. For most, Rastafarianism is just an alternative anti-establishment lifestyle where reggae music and ganja ensure a unique and somewhat contorted version of ‘heaven on earth’.

Unfortunately, many young “Rasta’s” becomes ensnared in serious drug-addiction, smuggling and related vices that leads to personal pain and destruction. Rastafarianism certainly offers a way out on the short-term, but in the long run, Rasta’s need the love and redemption that only Jesus Christ offers, just like everyone else!

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**Bob Marley: Reggae prophet**

In the late Sixties and early Seventies Rastafarianism worldwide unexpectedly gained fresh attention with the increasing popularity of a relatively new style of music: reggae. The ‘prophet’ who would communicate the Rastafarian message to the world through reggae was Bob Marley, a Jamaican singer, guitar player and songwriter.
ABOVE: Bob Marley, reggae musician, in action during a concert in the 1970's.

International stardom

Marley was born in 1945 as Robert Nesta Marley, and in 1961 he established his first group, The Rudeboys, which later became The Wailers. With his riveting rhythms and strong lyrics Marley quickly became the first reggae musician to achieve international star status. Two other members of The Wailers, Bunny Livingston and Peter Tosh, later also followed successful solo careers.

Reggae is a collective name for a variety of Jamaican music styles - 'ska', 'rock-steady', 'poppatop' and 'mento'. Marley's music also showed influences from the American rhythm and blues and Jamaican folk and club music.

Conversion to Rastafarianism

In 1967 Marley, who came from a Christian background, officially converted to Rastafarianism, and his music subsequently contained strong elements of spiritualism and mysticism. With his long dreadlocks and open advocating of the use of ganja, Marley became a symbol of rebelliousness and resistance against the Babylon system to many young blacks. Some of his songs openly promote revolution as a method for achieving personal freedom, while others involve love or a carefree life.

Death and legacy

In 1976 Marley made an enormous impact on Europe during a tour through, inter alia, England, Sweden, the Netherlands and the former West Germany. The same happened during a subsequent tour through the USA, where his albums such as Exodus (1977), Kaya (1978), Babylon by Bus (1978) and Uprising (1980) are still popular today.
In 1981, in the prime of his life and enjoying huge success with his music, Bob Marley died of cancer. Before he died, however, Marley converted back to Christianity. This fact (as proven among other things by his funeral-letter from the Orthodox Church in which the service was held), is often rejected by Rastafarians who refuse to believe that their “prophet” rejected their faith on his deathbed.

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