

# Rastafari

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## RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

There are no set, required personal or group practices for Rastafarians. How one chooses to pray or worship is strictly between the individual Rasta and Jah.

**Required Daily Observances.** There are no required daily religious observances for Rastafarians. Each person is encouraged to create and follow his/her own personal spiritual path.

**Required Weekly Observance.** There may or may not be a set time to conduct

worship. Some consider Saturday a holy day to be used for celebration. Drums are used in ceremonies. The Association of Rastafarian Theologians states that "we do utilize incense and oils in our ceremonies." What remains unclear is the type of oil used, its frequency, amount, and purpose.

Meetings open and close with a prayer that has been associated with the movement for many years (**The Rastafarians**, p. 125):

“Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hand unto God.

Oh thou God of Ethiopia, thou God of divine majesty, thy spirit come within our hearts to dwell in the parts of righteousness. That the hungry be fed, the sick nourished, the aged protected, and the infant cared for. Teach us to love and loyalty as it is in Zion.

Deliver us from the hands of our enemy that we may prove faithful to the last day, when our enemy has passed, and decayed in the depth of the sea or in the belly of a beast. O give us a place in thy kingdom forever and ever. So we hail our God Selassie I, Jehovah God, Ras Tafari, Almighty God, Ras Tafari, Great and terrible God, Ras Tafari. Who sitteth in Zion and reigneth in the hearts of men, and women, hear and bless us and sanctify us, and cause thy loving face to shine upon us thy children that we may be saved. Selah.”

**Required Occasional Services.** The most important meeting for Rastafarians is the "Nyabinghi," which involves members from many areas. This meeting is comparable to a convention, general conference, or synod, and may last up to a week.

**Holidays.** Three holy days are days of work proscription.

- July 23. Birthday of Haile Selassie.
- September 11. Rastafarian New Year.
- November 2. Coronation of H.I.M. Haile Selassie on November 2, 1930. In 1982, the 52<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the coronation, a nine-day celebration was established, using different colored candles, the recitation of different Psalms, and the eating of certain natural foods.

## **RELIGIOUS ITEMS**



## Personal Religious Items

- Crowns.
- Religious medallion, usually an ankh (an Egyptian symbol meaning life) and chain.

### Security note:

- A crown is multi-colored (red, yellow, green threads running through a black cap).
- A crown may not have a bill or peak and must be free of symbols.

**Security note:** A medallion containing an outline of the continent of Africa is not an appropriate religious medallion.

## Congregate Religious Items

- Flag of Ethiopia.
- Incense.
- Picture of H.I.M. Haile Selassie.
- Larger Ankh.

**Searches.** While Rastafarian inmates may place great value in the Bible, religious medallions, crowns, and other religious items, these can be handled by other people. Staff are expected to show the same respect for such items as for religious articles belonging to all traditions. Religious articles are not to be mishandled, thrown, placed on the floor, or brought into the bathroom and placed on the toilet or basin.

## REQUIREMENTS FOR MEMBERSHIP

**Requirements.** Membership occurs through a spiritual birth, through self-awareness, not by adoption but by right as a believer. Members are thus able to claim divinity

through their relationship with Haile Selassie. They believe there are no untrue Rastas. Either one fulfills his or her vows or one does not. No specific public rituals exist for membership.

**Total Membership.** There are about 700,000 adherents worldwide.

## **MEDICAL PROHIBITIONS**

There are no restrictions on medical treatment. Cosmetic surgery is forbidden (cf. the first of the statements of the moral code below). Blood transfusions, even the use of birth control, are not permitted by some Rastafarians, as those practices are against nature and the natural (I-tal) way of life.

Some Rastafarians may object to the TB screening by PPD (mantoux method) and request an X-ray instead. The first point of the Moral Code states, "We strongly object to sharp implements used in the desecration of the figure of Man; e.g., trimming and shaving, tattooing of the skin, and cutting of the flesh." All inmates, however, receive this screening unless medically contraindicated. The antigen used in the skin test does not contain pork or pork derivatives. HIV screening is also mandatory. These are public health issues in which all inmates must participate.

**Security note:** TB Screening by PPD (mantoux method) is required of all inmates. This is a public health issue in which all inmates must participate.

## **DIETARY STANDARDS**

Some Rastas eat I-tal foods. Ordinarily, the dietary needs for Rastafarians can best be met by self-selection from the mainline, which includes the no-flesh option.

Meat may or may not be a part of the individual's diet. Fish, however, is a staple of I-tal foods as long as the fish is not more than 12 inches long. Scavengers of the earth or of the sea, such as pigs, crabs, and lobsters, are forbidden. As a result, many Rastafarians are vegetarians.

## **BURIAL RITUALS**

There are no specific burial rituals.

## **SACRED WRITINGS**

Holy Bible, King James Version.

Holy Bible, Jerusalem Bible – The importance of the Jerusalem Bible is in the fact that God's name is spelled Jahweh, the closest approximation to JAH.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE**

No formal organizational structure exists for Rastafarianism, nor is there a single spokesperson for the faith group. The religion is highly individualistic; worship is primarily focused on the relationship between the individual Rasta and Jah, in the manifestation of His Imperial Majesty (H.I.M.) Haile Selassie. Some community resources are available for consultation and visits to institutions.

**Contact Office/Person.** No individual speaks for the whole Rastafarian tradition.



*Emperor Haile Selassie*

## **HISTORY**

In the early 1920's, Marcus Garvey, the founder of the "Back-to-Africa" movement and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), stated that people should "look to Africa for the crowning of a black King, he shall be the Redeemer." On November 2, 1930, the coronation of Emperor Haile Selassie, which means Power of the Holy Trinity, as king of Ethiopia took place. In addition, Haile Selassie claimed the following titles, "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah," "Elect of God," and "King of Kings" of Ethiopia. After the coronation and the apparent fulfillment of Marcus Garvey's prophecy, the Rastafarian movement officially began in 1930. Haile Selassie was born Tafari Makonnen on July 23, 1892. He married the daughter of Emperor Menelik II and became Ras (prince) Tafari, the name taken by his followers in Jamaica.

One of the early leaders was Leonard Howell, whose teachings helped develop the theology of the movement and whose arrest in 1933 by the Jamaican government helped develop the organizational structure as well. As a result of his arrest, no strong,

central leadership was encouraged or developed. After his release from prison he founded the Pinnacle Commune in the hills above Kingston, where it is believed that the use of ganja (marijuana) was adopted as a religious ritual.

Bob Marley, who popularized reggae, a mixture of soul music and Calypso, used his music as a means to spread the teachings of Rastafarianism. Marley used reggae music as a medium to speak out against oppression, exploitation, and racism. After his conversion to Rastafarianism, Marley was considered to be one of its great prophets.

The largest growth of the movement has taken place since 1975, largely attributed to Bob Marley and the worldwide acceptance of reggae as an avenue of Rastafarian self-expression, which continues today. Marley died of cancer on May 11, 1981.

H.I.M. Haile Selassie was assassinated in a Communist coup on August 28, 1975. Many Rastafarians believed that the story of his death was a fabrication by white society. Since H.I.M. is Jah, he could not have died.

## **THEOLOGY**

No comprehensive set of doctrines is available in Rasta theology. What has become acceptable is largely a matter of individual understanding and interpretation. This is, in part, due to the lack of a single authoritative voice among Rastafarians.

**H.I.M. Haile Selassie.** Emperor Haile Selassie is divine and traces his lineage directly back to Menelik I, son of the Queen of Sheba (Ethiopia) and King Solomon of Jerusalem. This makes him a direct descendant of the root of David – the same one that produced Jesus Christ, who was one and the same with Selassie, but of an “earlier dispensation.” Several passages from Scripture pointed to his coming, such as Psalm 87:3-4, Revelation 5:2-5, and Revelation 19:16. Upon his death in 1975, the divine continues to live within each member. Life for the Rastafarian is not limited to the flesh. The name of God is Jah, an abbreviated form of Jehovah (Psalm 68:4).

**“I and I” or “Inl.”** “I and I” is an expression to emphasize the concept of oneness. No person is more privileged in life than another; all are considered equal. A further meaning is that God is in all human beings; it stresses the collective unity and experience of all individuals. That is why Rastas use “I and I” instead of we or you and I.

**The Bible.** Rastafarians accept the Bible, but with conditions. They prefer passages in harmony with their specific doctrines and believe that much of the Bible has been distorted in its translation. The Bible is further interpreted in an Afrocentric manner, a divinely inspired perspective given by the creative powers of His Imperial Majesty.

Rastas believe that numerous Biblical texts support their teaching that God is black (Jeremiah 8:21), for to them blackness is synonymous with holiness. Thus Haile Selassie meets the requirement of the movement that he is both divine and black. Furthermore, according to Psalm 87: 3 and 4, clear reference is made that God would be born in Ethiopia. An allegorical interpretation of Biblical passages is preferred. A key to understanding the Scriptures is to look for hidden meanings and directives in Biblical passages.

**The Devil.** The God of the white person is a different God from that of the Rastafarians. In reality, the God of the white race is the devil, because only the devil is the source of “all evils that have come upon the world, the god of hate, blood, oppression and war.” (Barrett, **The Rastafarians**, p. 108)

**Repatriation.** Jamaica is hell, Ethiopia is heaven. Repatriation to Ethiopia specifically, and Africa in general, is considered to be Rastafarians’ heaven on earth. Many Rastas would say that this repatriation is not a literal journey anymore, but describes life’s spiritual journey.

**Role of Women.** Rastafarian women are usually segregated from men. Their role in Rasta belief is clearly limited and subservient to men’s. Deuteronomy 22:5 dictates modest dress, while I Corinthians 11: 5 and 6 calls for covering women’s heads while in public. They do not wear makeup or fragrances. Nor are they permitted to draw from the chillum, the chalice used with ganja on journeys.

**Dreadlocks.** Wearing hair in dreadlocks is one of the distinctive physical characteristics of the Rastafarians. The Biblical injunction against the cutting of hair, especially for those who dedicate their lives to Jah as Nazerites, became the basis for letting their hair grow. In addition, the dreads represent the strength and biblical symbolism of the Lion of Judah, since dreads give off the appearance of a lion’s mane.

Rastafarians view their dreadlocks as their outward commitment to Jah and are able to receive inspiration from Jah through their natural “receptors,” the dreads. Dreadlocks express the Rasta’s commitment to live righteously and naturally.

**Crowns.** Tams or crowns may be worn to cover or contain the dreadlocks. In the community, crowns may contain peaks or bills symbolizing the forward progression of the Rastafarian individual, but in Bureau facilities peaks or bills are not authorized. Generally, crowns contain red, yellow, and green, taken from the Garvey movement and also the colors of the Ethiopian flag. Some may contain black as well.

- Red symbolizes the church triumphant, the church of the Rastas. It can also

symbolize the blood that martyrs have shed in the history of the movement.

- Yellow represents the wealth of the homeland, Ethiopia.
- Green represents the beauty and vegetation of Ethiopia, the promised land.
- Black is sometimes used to represent the African continent.

**Ganja.** The use of ganja by Rastafarians is one of the ways members are able to develop insights into their beliefs that are not available by other means. Ganja is the name given to a specifically cultivated type of Indian hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) derived from female plants. As Barrett noted, “its use produces psycho-spiritual effects and has socio-religious functions, especially for people under stress” (**The Rastafarians**, p. 129). The use of ganja in their rituals is Biblically based, Rastafarians believe. Passages that refer to descriptions of the “herb,” such as Genesis 1:12, Proverbs 15:17, and Psalm 104:14, justify its use. Primarily, ganja, or the “holy herb,” provides a new understanding of self, the universe, and God. In worship, the prayer recited is:

Glory be to the Father and to the Master of Creation.

As it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be.

World without end: Jah Rastafari: Eternal God Selassie I.

**The Lost Tribes of Israel.** To the Rastafarian, Israel and Ethiopia are the same; the names simply refer to a holy people. The Rastafarians, the true Israelites, have been punished by Jah for their sins through slavery under whites and, when freed from slavery, remained under the white structure of oppression. Hence they were exiled to Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. Although Rastas already should have returned, they were prevented by trickery of the government. One day all will return to Ethiopia.

**Avatar.** The Rastafarian belief in reincarnation is similar to that found in Hinduism. God has revealed himself in various forms in history. Moses was the first *Avatar* or savior, since he was actually God revealed in the form of man. Elijah was the second *Avatar* and Jesus Christ was the third. Haile Selassie is the climax of God’s creation and the final *Avatar*. No other self-revelation of God will appear.

**Major Groups within Rastafarianism.** There are a number of branches within Rastafarianism, among them the Orthodox or Nyabinghi, the 12 Tribes of Israel, and the Bobo Shante.

- **Orthodox or Nyabinghi.** This group tries to bridge Rastafarianism and Ethiopian Orthodoxy. Their theology is a mix of Christianity and Rastafarian beliefs. The members consider themselves to be Nazirites and wear dreadlocks. Their tams almost always include the color black.

■ **Twelve Tribes of Israel.** The 12 Tribes of Israel believe that His Imperial Majesty is Christ revealed. The members regard the wearing of locks as an option which may or may not be used by members, who do not consider themselves to be Nazirites. Their tams include equal bands of red, green, and gold. Bob Marley belonged to the 12 Tribes of Israel until shortly before his death, when he became an Orthodox Rastafarian.

■ **Bobo Shante.** Bobo Shante Rastafarians view their leader, Prince Emanuel I, as the Christ who is now revealed. To them, His Imperial Majesty would be the Father and Prince Emanuel the Son, using Trinitarian terminology. Bobo Shante Rastas consider themselves to be Nazirites and wear dreadlocks. They generally do not wear colors on their headdress, which looks like a stylized turban.

**Moral Code.** Sam Brown, one of the early Rastafarian leaders, wrote this 10-point moral code (**The Rastafarians**, p. 126):

■ We strongly object to sharp implements used in the desecration of the figure of Man; e.g., trimming and shaving, tattooing of the skin, and cutting of the flesh.

■ We are basically vegetarians, making scant use of certain animal flesh, outlawing the use of swine's flesh in any form, shell fish, scaleless fishes, snails, etc.

■ We worship and observe no other God but Rastafari, outlawing all other forms of Pagan worship yet respecting all believers.

■ We love and respect the brotherhood of mankind, yet our first love is to the sons of Ham.

■ We disapprove and utterly abhor hate, jealousy, envy, deceit, guile, treachery, etc.

■ We are avowed to create a world of one brotherhood.

■ We do not agree to the pleasures of present day society and its modern evils.

■ Our duty is to extend the hand of charity to any brother in distress, firstly, for ones of the Rastafari order – secondly, to any human, animal, plant, etc.

■ We do adhere to the ancient laws of Ethiopia.

■ Thou shall give no thought to the aid, titles, and possessions that the enemy in his fear may seek to bestow on you; resolution to your purpose is the love of Rastafari.