

Rastafari



The **Rastafari movement** is a "messianic religio-political movement" that began in the Jamaican slums in the 1920s and 30s. The most famous Rastafari is Bob Marley, whose reggae music gained the Jamaican movement international recognition.



There is significant variation within the Rastafari movement and no formal organization. Some Rastafarians see Rasta more as a way of life than a religion. However, uniting the diverse movement is belief in the divinity and/or messiahship of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I, the influence of Jamaican culture, resistance of oppression, and pride in African heritage.

The Rastafarian lifestyle usually includes ritual use of marijuana, avoidance of alcohol, the wearing of one's hair in dreadlocks, and vegetarianism.

Fast Facts

Date founded: Generally said to be November 2, 1930, the year Emperor Haillie Selassie I (1892-1975) was crowned, but based in a movement of the 1920s.

Place founded: Jamaica, West Indies

Founder: Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), a black Jamaican who taught in the 1920s and is considered a second John the Baptist.

Adherents: About 1 million worldwide

Terminology

Followers of the Rastafari movement are known as Rastafarians, Rastafaris, Rastas, or Ras Tafarians. The movement is named for Ras Tafari Makonnen, who was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia in 1930.

Rastafaris dislike the term "Rastafarianism" because they reject the "isms and schisms" that characterize oppressive and corrupt white society. The movement is referred to as "the Rastafari movement," "Rasta," or "Rastafari."

History

Rastafari developed in the slums of Kingston, Jamaica, in the 1920s and 30s. In an environment of great poverty, depression, racism and class discrimination, the Rasta message of black pride, freedom from oppression, and the hope of return to the African homeland was gratefully received.

The Rastafarian movement began with the teachings of **Marcus Garvey** (1887-1940), a black Jamaican who led a "Back to Africa" movement. He taught that Africans are the true Israelites and have been exiled to Jamaica and other parts of the world as divine punishment.

Garvey encouraged pride in being black and worked to reverse the mindset of inferiority that centuries of enslavement had ingrained on the minds of blacks. Garvey is regarded as a second John the Baptist and famously prophesied in 1927, "Look to Africa, for there a king shall be crowned."



Marcus Garvey.

On November 2, 1930, **Ras Tafari Makonnen** was crowned emperor of Ethiopia (he ruled until 1974). At his coronation, he took the name **Haile Selassie**, meaning "Might of the Trinity."

Selassie also took the titles, "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elect of God and King of the Kings of Ethiopia." These titles are traditionally given to Ethiopian kings and reflect the Old Testament emphasis of Ethiopian Christianity. For Rastafarians, Selassie's coronation was a clear fulfillment of Revelation 5:5, Ezekiel 28:25, and Marcus Garvey's prophecy.

Followers of Garvey's teachings believed that Selassie is the **messiah** that had been predicted, and that his coronation indicated the divine punishment was completed and the return to Africa would begin. Rastafarians named their movement for Ras Tafari and regarded the emperor as the physical presence of God (Jah) on earth.

Marcus Garvey himself, however, did not think highly of Selassie. He regarded him as an incompetent leader and in collusion with white oppressors after his defeat by the Italians and acceptance of British assistance to regain his throne. In 1937, Garvey wrote an editorial entitled "The Failure of Haile Selassie as Emperor."

Haile Selassie was an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian and he explicitly **denied his divine status** as proclaimed in Jamaica. In a radio interview with Canada's CBC news in 1967, he said, "I have heard of that idea [that I am divine]. I also met certain Rastafarians. I told them clearly that I am a man, that I am mortal, and that I will be replaced by the oncoming generation, and that they should never make a mistake in assuming or pretending that a human being is emanated from a deity." This denial has not deterred Rastafarians from believing the emperor to be divine.



Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia, whose birth name was Ras Tafari Makonnen.

As an emperor, Haile Selassie worked to modernize Ethiopia and to steer it into the mainstream of African politics. He brought Ethiopia into the League of Nations and the United Nations and made Addis Ababa the major center for the Organization of African Unity. Selassie was named *Time* magazine's Person of the Year for 1935 and was the first black person to appear on the cover in 1930. He was the only black leader recognized by the rulers of Europe.



Emperor Haile Selassie I on the cover of *Time* magazine, November 3, 1930.

The Rastafarian movement first became visible in Jamaica in the 1930s, when peaceful communities were founded in the Kingston slums. During this time, the Rastafarians developed a distinctive style of language, hairstyle, art and music.

Leonard Howell emerged as an early leader of the movement. He taught six fundamental Rastafarian principles: (1) hatred for the White race; (2) the complete superiority of the Black race; (3) revenge on Whites for their wickedness; (4) the negation, persecution, and humiliation of the government and legal bodies of Jamaica; (5) preparation to go back to Africa; and (6) acknowledging Emperor Haile Selassie as the Supreme Being and only ruler of Black people. Many of these principles were subsequently abandoned as the Rastafarian movement developed.

Howell was arrested by the Jamaican government in 1933 for his loyalty to the Ethiopian emperor over King George V. This may have contributed to the decision to keep Rastafarianism leaderless and independent.

Haile Selassie met with Rasta elders in Addis Ababa in the 1950s. In **1955**, he offered 500 acres of his personal land to black people wishing to return to Africa. Around 2,200 blacks, mainly Rastafarians, moved to the land (in Shashemene) during the 1960s. However, poverty, a lack of acceptance by the Ethiopian population and disputes with the government that overthrew Selassie has caused that population to dwindle. The current population is estimated at 250.

A major event in Rastafarian history was **Haile Selassie's visit to Jamaica** on April 21, 1966. Rita Marley, Bob Marley's wife, converted to the Rastafari faith after seeing Haile Selassie; she said she saw stigmata appear on him and was instantly convinced of his divinity. Further evidence of his divinity was seen in the fact that a serious drought ended with rain upon his arrival.

He told the Rastafarians that they should not seek to immigrate to Ethiopia until they had liberated the people of Jamaica, a command that came to be known as "liberation before repatriation." As well as its profound religious significance for Rastas, the event helped to legitimize the movement. April 21 is celebrated as a Rastafarian holiday.

Selassie was deposed in 1974 in a military coup and kept under house arrest until he was apparently killed by his captors in 1975. Many Rastas believed that his death was a hoax, and that he lives on in hiding until the Day of Judgment. Others say that he lives on through individual Rastafarians.



Album cover of *Catch a Fire* (1973).

One of the most important figures in the history of the Rastafari movement is the reggae artist **Bob Marley** (1945-81). The son of a white father and black mother, Marley lived in the Kingston slums of Jamaica. He recorded his first singles in 1962, had his first international hit with The Wailers' album *Catch A Fire* in 1973. He had his first solo hit outside Jamaica with "No Woman, No Cry," in 1975.

Bob Marley became a Rastafari around 1966. He grew dreadlocks, adopted marijuana as a sacred sacrament, and is said to have begun every performance proclaiming the divinity of Jah Rastafari. His immense popularity as a musician brought both reggae and Rasta to international attention. Reggae music is intimately connected to Rastafari and its lyrics often speak of oppression, poverty, slavery, apartheid and human rights.

Marley was diagnosed with cancer in 1977 and he succumbed to the disease on May 11, 1981. *Uprising* (1980), Bob Marley's final studio album, is one of his most religious works, including the tracks "Redemption Song" and "Forever Loving Jah."

A few months before his death, Bob Marley was baptized into the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, a Christian faith that rejects the divinity of Haile Selassie. This has allowed both faiths to claim Marley as "their own."

Marley received a state funeral in Jamaica, which combined elements of Ethiopian Orthodoxy and Rastafari. He was buried in a crypt near his birthplace with his Gibson Les Paul guitar, a soccer ball, a cannabis bud, and a Bible.

In 1996, the Rastafari movement worldwide was given consultative status by the United Nations. Today, there are approximately 1 million Rastafarians worldwide. There are official branches in England, Canada, the Caribbean islands and America, and members in many more countries.