

Creative Missional Strategies for Witnessing Christ to Rastafarians

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Abstract

This article investigates the Rastafari movement. Its purpose is to better grasp the nature of the movement and to highlight strategies that enable an intelligible communication of Christ to its adepts. Drawing on historical descriptive research and descriptive phenomenology, the article contends that, for the gospel to make sense to Rastas, missionaries should seek to present Christ to them within their sociocultural frame of reference. Results show that the movement emerged in Jamaica in a context of the oppression and discrimination of Blacks by the Whites. In general, Rastafarians are Afrocentrists and physical immortalists. They hold that Haile Selassie is divine, Ethiopia is Zion, the use of cannabis is spiritual and sacramental, and Babylon (the corrupt and vicious Whiteman's culture) should be resisted and overcome. They practice 'Reasoning', observe 'Binghis,' cherish meditation, wear dreadlocks, build their lifestyle around the principle of 'livity,' and value family, Blacks' dignity, and communal life. Missionary approaches targeting Rastas should be strategized taking into consideration these peculiarities.

Introduction

Given that the practice of religion is inherent to humanity, the quest for worship has characterized humans since times immemorial. This explains why, from time to time, history witnesses the emergence of a new religion. Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Shintoism, Christianity, Islam,

the Bahai Faith, are just a few names among the plethora of world religions. Yet, as days stretch into months, years, decades and, eventually, centuries, the number of religious groups keeps swelling as new religions spring forth.

One of the newest religions that burst forth last century is Rastafarianism (it also identified as the Rastafari movement). With their “strange” ways and “subversive” attitudes towards the *status quo*, members of this new religion have raised innumerable questions in countless minds regarding their identity. This research attempts a close investigation of Rastafarianism. It aims at better understanding what the movement is all about and finding ways to present Christ to its adepts in a manner that is intelligible to them. It arises from the conviction that the Rastafarian population needs to hear the gospel within their sociocultural frame of reference. It follows that understanding their basic beliefs and practices is crucial to enhance effective discipleship-evangelism among them. The research builds on four main points. The first point examines the name as well as origin of the Rastafari movement and briefly surveys its historical development. The second point explores its fundamental teachings. The third point studies its basic practices. The final point suggests missional strategies for sharing Christ with Rastas. The study draws upon a historical descriptive research approach and descriptive phenomenology. While the historical description method consists in describing phenomena (people, events, cultures, etc.) comprehensively (Hassan, 2024, para. 2) to enable understanding, descriptive phenomenology, in its basic form, is a “research method that explores and describes the lived experience of individuals” SCISPACE (2024) or phenomena in general.

The Name, Origin, and Historical Development

This section explores three foundational facts about Rastafarianism. It discusses its name, origin, and historical development.

Name

Rastafari is an Africa-centered religion. It emerged in Jamaica in the 1930s following the crowning of Haile Selassie I as the Emperor of Ethiopia. It draws its name from Ras Tafari Makonnen, the name Selassie (1898-1975) bore before he became the Emperor of Ethiopia. As such, Rastafari compounds the terms *Ras* (literally “head” or “prince”), the title given to the Amharic royalty in Ethiopia, and *Tafari*, Selassie’s pre-coronation name (Rastafari, 2023, para. 1). This fact indicates that Rastafarianism, as a social phenomenon, revolves around the name of Selassie, thereby highlighting his preponderant and key role in the movement. It explains why Rastafarians (also known as *Rastas* or *Lockmen*) believe that Selassie is Jah (the Rasta’s name for God), Jah Rastafari, God incarnate, a member of the Trinity, and the Messiah, who, according to biblical teachings, is to return.

Origin

As noted already, the Rastafarian movement saw the light of the day in the 1930s. At that time, discrimination against the black race was at its peak in many Western countries. In Jamaica specifically, racism, oppression, and class discrimination were so severe that majority of Blacks lived in oppression, dismal poverty, and were regarded as sub-humans. This racially tensed atmosphere became an ideal platform for the eruption of the Black power movement. The movement arose in the early 1930s and aimed at awakening the consciousness of Black people to freedom and the need to restore their identity, pride, and dignity. At the heart of this movement was the colossal influence a Jamaican nationalist called Marcus Mosiah Garvey.

Garvey was a black political activist who founded the “Back to Africa” movement. He preached that “as long as blacks remained outside Africa, especially in the United States, they would continue to be afflicted by a ‘slave mentality’ which would prevent them from achieving the true greatness which they

deserve” (About.com, 2008). As an ardent advocate of the Black pride (I-ness), which he successfully propagated in Jamaica throughout the twenties and thirties, Garvey promoted Black Nationalism, Black Separatism, and Pan-Africanism. He challenged black people across the world to come together in brotherhood and work obstinately to free themselves from the shackles of European domination. This challenge was in sync with the ideological tenets of the *Universal Negro Improvement Association* (UNIA), an organization (one of the largest in African-American history) that Garvey founded in the early 1920s to promote the cause of the Blacks (Leeuwen, 2000, para. 1). It is within this thrust that, in the same period, he created the *African Orthodox Church* whose vocation was to provide the Blacks with an alternative church to the predominant ‘White’ churches.

In 1927, Garvey called a black congregation in a Kingston Church to “look to Africa” for the imminent crowning of a Black king, insisting that his coronation would indicate the proximity of the day of deliverance (Jamaicans.com, 2003b, para. 3). When three years later (1930), Ras Tafari was crowned Emperor Haile Selassie and attributed the title, “King of kings, Lord of lords and the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah,” a large number of Blacks in Jamaica concluded that Garvey’s prophecy had been fulfilled (Jamaicans.com, 2003, para. 3).

Although Garvey never identified with the Rastafari movement and his adepts (the Garveyists) contended that Rastafarians misinterpreted their master, his ideas have been extensively influential in the development of the Rastafari worldview. Actually, it is his philosophy that gave the Rastafari movement the early impetus it needed to take off. Little wonder, Rastafarians “regard Marcus Garvey as a prophet similar to John the Baptist, who foretold Christ’s coming” (Rastafari 2003b, para. 4). Garvey’s ideas, therefore, were the fertile ground on which Rastafarian ideology took roots.

Historical Development

The coronation of Haile Selassie in Addis Ababa in November 2, 1930, was a turning point in the history of the Rastafarianism. Given that this coronation was reported in two consecutive *Time Magazines* (note that this magazine later named him 'Time's person' of the Year for 1935) and in two successive *American National Geographic* issues, Selassie (and his adepts) came to the center stage of the international scene (Kos, 2019, para. 50).

More to that, since Ethiopia was the only African nation that successfully resisted colonialism and Selassie the only Black leader to be accepted among Western kings and queens, Selassie gained a great following among the Blacks, especially in Jamaica. Many Jamaicans identified with him, became his disciples (this justifies the name Rastafari), and revered him as their god and ruler. It follows that, with the coming of Selassie to the throne and the immense impact this event created around the world, Rastafarianism was formed, advertised, and, consequently, gained unprecedented momentum. From then, the Rastafari movement witnessed a robust and rapid expansion.

A key and most prominent figure in the development of Rastafarianism was a Black Jamaican named Leonard P. Howell (1898-1981). He is the first known propagator of Rastafari as a movement. He founded the *Pinnacle of Encampment* (a village) of about 5000 people in an "abandoned estate between Kingston and Spanish town [in Jamaica] where the followers of this new religion found a safe haven" (Jamaicans.com, 2003b, para. 1). He became the chief of that village and, as it was held, he married 30 wives.

After the coronation of Selassie in 1930, Howell declared Garvey a prophet and proclaimed Selassie the expected Messiah, the one whose second coming was predicted in the Bible. He advocated six foundational teachings that most early Rastafarians adhered to, namely, hatred for the White race, the

superiority of the Blacks, revenge on the Whites for their wickedness, the preparation of Blacks to return to Africa (this was to be achieved by negating, persecuting, and humiliating the government and the legal bodies of Jamaica), and the acknowledgement of Selassie as the supreme being (that is, God) and the only ruler of the Black people (Rastafari 2003b, para. 2). In 1934, Howell was charged of sedition and imprisoned for two years (he was the first Rastafarian to be imprisoned). In many other instances, he was arrested and jailed because of his revolutionary theology that one of his sentencing judges once qualified as “the Devil’s doctrines” (Yardie Reggae Collection, 2013, para. 4).

From the 1950s, the Rastafari movement faced much resistance from the ruling class in Jamaica. Open confrontation between the middle-class police and the poor Black Rastas became common so that many of them were beaten, some killed, and many stripped of their dreadlocks. This wave of persecution culminated into the destruction in 1954 of the *Pinnacle of Encampment* that Howell founded.

However, the movement kept growing especially through the boosting ‘peace speech’ Selassie gave in the United Nations on October 4, 1963 and his visit to Jamaica on April 21, 1966. It is worth noting that the impact of Selassie’s visit to Jamaica was tremendous in establishing the Rastafari movement and to ensure its survival. Black Kos (2019) describes the event this way:

Somewhere between one and two hundred thousand Rastafarians from all over Jamaica descended on Kingston airport having heard that the man whom they considered to be God was coming to visit them. They waited at the airport smoking lots of cannabis and playing drums ... [T]he visit was a success. Rita Marley, Bob Marley’s wife, converted to the Rastafarian faith after seeing Haile Selassie. The great significance of this event in the development of

the Rastafarian religion should not be underestimated. Having been outcast in society, they gained a temporary respectability for the first time. By making Rasta more acceptable, it opened the way for the commercialization of reggae, leading in turn to the further global spread of Rastafari. (para. 55-56)

It is from 1975 that the Rastafari movement experienced its most phenomenal growth. This growth is principally credited to the reggae artist, Bob Marley, by whom reggae gained international acceptance, becoming the main vehicle for Rastafari self-expression. Owing to his impressive worldwide influence that converted multitudes outside Jamaica to Rastafari faith, Bob Marley became since 1975 a prophet of Rastafari. Through his influence, Rastafari teachings gained wide acceptance and sympathy so that, even after Selassie's death in 1980, the movement kept increasing.

Today, in Jamaica, the land of its origin, it is estimated that 1.1% of the population is Rastafarian while the total global number of Rastafarians ranges between 700,000 and 1,000,000 (Prince, 2023, para. 1; WorldData.info, 2023). According to Charles Prince (2023), Rastafarians are currently found in every continent of the world (para. 1). In my country, Cameroon, the number of Rastas seems not to be officially documented. However, Rastafarianism is extant in this country. Some household Rastas in Cameroon includes such names as Boudjeka Kamto, Rasta Cool, and Joakim Noah. They regularly organize meetings on May 11 to join the worldwide Rasta community in celebrating Bob Marley's death anniversary (Obam, 2005; Manahan, 2013; Kanga, 2020).

Contemporary Rastafarianism has three sects. These include the *Bobo Shanti* (they adhere to OT Laws), the *Nyahbinghi* Order (the oldest sect named after the Queen Nyahbinghi of Uganda), and The *Twelve Tribes of Israel* (they believe they are Israelites).

Fundamental Teachings

Rastafarianism stands on key tenets. Some of the most important include the deity of Haile Selassie, Ethiopia as Zion, Babylon as the Whiteman's culture, the spiritual use of cannabis, Afrocentrism, and physical immortality.

The Deity of Haile Selassie

Rastafari theology revolves around Selassie's divinity. In Rastafarianism, he represents much more than just a political leader; he is God. Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah (2001) describes him as "a 20th century manifestation of God who has lighted our pathway toward righteousness, and is therefore worthy of reverence" (para. 1).

Rastafarians call him *Jah* or *Jah* Rastafari. In Rastafari, Jah (from the Hebrew *Yah*, meaning God) is the most commonly used names to express Selassie's divinity. Being Jah, Selassie is viewed as the living incarnate God; the supreme God who created all and is above all. Accordingly, many Rastafarians worship him as God. This explains why, in many reggae songs, Selassie is revered and placed on a divine pedestal. Bob Marley, for instance, dedicated songs such as "Jah is Mighty" and "Forever Loving Jah" to the honor of Haile Selassie.

Of note is the fact that, although Rastafarians such as Esther Selassie Antonin (1998) equate the Rastafarian 'Jah' to the 'Jehovah' of the Old Testament (para. 1), it is most probable that the whole concept of Jah in Rastafari finds its origin from an ancient esoteric order in Ethiopia. In his book *Dread Jesus*, William D. Spencer contends that Archibald Dunkley and Joseph N. Hibbert (they were among the early preachers that inspired Rastafari in Ethiopia) were both members of a Prince Hall Masonic organization called the *Ancient Mystic Order of Ethiopia*. Accordingly, Spencer observes that "several features of the Rastafari movement derive from this lodge, including the

name 'Jah', from the Masonic form 'Jah-Bul-On' as revealed in Royal Arch Masonry" (CESNUR, 2007, para. 2).

Rastafarians find other evidences of the deity of Selassie in the names given him at his coronation such as "Kings of kings and Lord of Lords" or "Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah." Consequently, and especially following the 'prophecy' of Marcus Garvey about a Black ruler bringing about deliverance, Rastafarians teach that Selassie is the savior and messiah whose second return is prophesied in the Bible.

The messiahship of Selassie is further substantiated, according to Rastafarians, by their belief that he is supposedly a "direct descendant of King David, the 225th ruler in an unbroken line of Ethiopian Kings from the time of Solomon and Sheba" (Hartman, 2008; Barbados Tourism Encyclopedia, n. d., para. 3). It is worth mentioning that the belief that Ethiopian kings are issued from the union of Solomon and Queen Sheba is cast in concrete in Rastafarian mindset. In their view, being of Davidic descent, Haile Selassie's life and rule is the 20th century manifestation of the incarnate God. He is Christ reborn and the fulfillment of biblical prophecies about Christ's second coming.

Rastafarians still project the divinity of Selassie in the way they interpret his death. As God, they believe he can never die. Hence, they advocate that Selassie's death that supposedly occurred in 1975 was a hoax. They are convinced that he will return to free his disciples [the blacks essentially] and lead them to Ethiopia, the promise land.

Ethiopia as Zion

Like most religions, Rastafari has an eschatological dimension. One important aspect of Rastafarian eschatology is encapsulated in the concept of Zion. Zion is the paradise of freedom on earth. In Rastafarianism, Zion is Africa – Ethiopia more specifically. Some Rastas hold that they constitute the true children of Israel in contemporary times and relish the idea

(for those outside Africa) to be repatriated to Africa or Zion. The dream of most Rastafarians is that “Haile Selassie will call the day of judgment, when the righteous shall return home to Mount Zion, identified with Africa, to live forever in peace, love and harmony” (Academic Kids, n. d., para. 16).

Many great reggae singers have made important allusions to Zion in their songs. Bob Marley’s “Zion Train” and “Iron Lion Zion” are glaring examples. Of note is also Damian Marley’s song “Road to Zion.” Other reggae groups such as “Steel Pulse” and “Cocoa Tea” have also made several allusions to Zion.

Babylon as the White Man’s Culture

The concept of Babylon is of strategic importance in Rastafarian teachings. Rastas use it in reference to human institutions and government (beginning from the tower of Babel) that stand at odds with the rule and the will of Jah who is in Zion. Babylon is a corrupt and materialistic culture characterized by inhumanity, oppression, domination, and wickedness. Babylon specifically points to the White man’s culture that has subjected the Black race through centuries of ruthless oppression, slavery, colonialism, political, cultural as well as economic dominance, etc. Rastafarians also associate Babylon to Rome and are defiant of it because in 1935 the Italian invasion of Ethiopia failed under the rule their ‘Living God’ Selassie. In this respect, they hold that, if Rome fell under Selassie, Babylon will eventually fall under the hegemony of the Black race.

Spiritual Use of the Cannabis

In the Rastafari ideology, the cannabis (usually known as *ganja*, *herb*, *marijuana* or *lamb’s bread*) is a spiritual herb and smoking it is not done for mere pleasure or entertainment. Smoking *ganja*, according to Rastas is a sacrament that can be equated to Holy Communion in Christianity or the burning of incense in Judaism. It is an act that is essentially spiritual and is often accompanied by Bible studies (Kos, 2019, para. 25).

Rastas believe that ganja “cleanses the body and the mind, exalts consciousness [the consciousness of Jah], facilitates peacefulness and brings them closer to Jah” (Kos, 2019, para. 25). According to them, *ganja* smoke is ‘holy smoke’ and the environment it covers is ‘holy ground.’

Rastafarians see *ganja* as a powerful substance that opens people’s minds to truth. It is the “wisdom weed” that helps one to gain wisdom and the ‘tree of life’ the Bible alludes to (Jamaican.com, 2003c, para. 3-4). In their perspective, *ganja* enables its smokers to achieve a deeper *itation* (meditation) with Jah (McAlister, 2024, para. 4). This precisely, they insist, is the reason for which Babylon that wants to keep people in stupidity and darkness rejects its use, making it illegal (Kos, 1991, para. 28).

Rastafarians consider *ganja* as a precious gift of God that enhances spiritual meditation and believe its use enjoys biblical sanction. They convoke Genesis 3:18 (“thou shalt eat the herb of the field”) and Psalms 104:4, (“He [God] causeth the grass to grow for the cattle, and herb for the service of man”) to substantiate the spiritual and sacramental use of *ganja*. Given that, in their view, *ganja* is so sacred, Rastas contend that smoking *ganja* should be given legal recognition.

Afrocentrism

Rastafarianism is *Afrocentric* in that it is a religion that revolves around Africa and centers on the black race. It is the religion of Blacks, founded by Blacks, with a black Messiah, a black God, a black man’s Bible, etc. The promise land or paradise is in Africa and only the chosen ones (Blacks) or those who identify with Blacks will be part of it. Rastafarianism is promoted by Blacks, furthers the Black cause, and “rejects the white man’s world, as the new age Babylon of greed and dishonesty” (Barbados Tourism Encyclopedia, n. d., para. 4). Afrocentrism is further depicted in the current Rastafarian flag (their main symbol) with three bands of red, gold, and green. *Red*

represents the blood of African martyrs, including dead black activists whose blood has been spilled in their fight for freedom, equal rights, and justice; *gold* stands for sunshine (Jah's light that shines on people), religious freedom, and Africa's natural wealth; and *green* symbolizes Jah's good earth as well as the fertile vegetation of Ethiopia (the Promise Land) (Rastafari Resource Hub, 2022, para. 7).

Rastafarian are convinced that Blacks are God's chosen people (some refer to themselves as the twelve tribes of Israel) who have been suppressed (or, as they like putting it, *downpressed*) through slave trade, colonization, and, now, neocolonialism. A return of Blacks from wherever they are on the globe to Africa (this is what the 'Back to Africa Movement' advocates) is essential in that it will enhance the reinstatement of Black's position in society. Repatriation to Africa is at the heart of Rastafarian eschatology. It is the crux of their earnest expectation. However, before this repatriation comes to fruition, the Blacks need to be liberated. Liberation can only be achieved if Black people are empowered, inculcated self-reliance at home and abroad, awakened to black consciousness and pride, decolonized, and enabled to denounce the White man's Eurocentric worldview and colonial brainwashing that caused them to be ashamed of their black identity and heritage.

This overemphasis on the Black's importance has brought many Rastas (especially the Bobo Ashanti) to preach black supremacy. Black supremacy holds to the intrinsic wickedness of the White race and advocates the superiority of Black people. Although today, many Rastafarians adhere to a more multiracial approach to their religion, a good number among them still believes in a Black supremacist doctrine.

Physical Immortality

Majority of Rastas are physical immortalists. This means that the chosen few, who obviously are Rastas, will continue to live forever in their current bodies. In other words, they will *everlive*

in paradise, that is, Ethiopia. The concept of *everliving* is different from the Christian idea of eternal life in that purist Rastas tend not to believe that they will die physically to be transmuted to heaven in a glorified or transformed body. *Everlivingness* does not conceive death nor does it teach that physical bodies will be transformed. And even when one of them dies, the idea of death is defeated in this movement because Rastafarians have adopted the Hindu belief of reincarnation (David, 1998, para. 8).

Basic Practices

This section discusses four basic aspects of Rastafarian practices. The first aspect explores their religious ceremonies. The second aspect scrutinizes the meaning and place of dreadlocks in the Rastafari movement. The third aspect highlights the place of meditation among Rastas. The final aspect, examines their lifestyles, values, and diet.

Religious Ceremonies

Religious ceremonies in Rastafari generally include chanting, drumming, and meditation which have the potential to lead to a state of heightened spirituality. Rastafarians have two types of religious ceremonies: the *Reasoning* and the *Binghi*.

Reasoning

The *Reasoning* is a simple ceremony that bring Rastas of a locality together for reflection. In this ceremony, they smoke *ganja* and deliberate on ethical issues. Anyone who is privileged to light the herb is requested to say a brief prayer prior to doing so. Once the herb is lighted, discussions can proceed.

Binghi

The *Binghi* is a Rastafarian sacred day or Holiday. The Rastas believed that the word *Binghi*, from *Nyabinghi*, originally referred to an ancient (it is now extinct) order of Black militants

(the *Nyabinghi* warriors) in eastern Africa that vowed to exterminate the White man's oppression. The order centered around a woman with healing powers known as Muhumusa and was named after *Nyabinghi*, a legendary *Nande* woman whose tale is present in cultures of Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania¹ and whose spirit is believed to have dwelled in Muhumusa. The Nyabinghi (or Binghi) was adopted by Jamaican Rastafarians to identify their meetings and also to describe a specific drumming style Rastas used in their religious gatherings.

Binghis may last for several days. They are marked by abundant singing, feasting, dancing, ganja smoking, and meditation. *Binghis* often take place during the following dates:

- January 7 – Orthodox Ethiopian Christmas.
- February 6 – Bob Marley's birthday.
- April 21 – The anniversary of Emperor Haile Selassie I's visit to Jamaica in 1966. This day is identified as Grounation Day or Groundation Day.
- July 23 – The birthday of Emperor Haile Selassie I.
- August 17 – The birthday of Marcus Garvey.
- November 2 – The Coronation of Haile Selassie.

Meditation

As evoked above, Rastas give an important place to meditation. Meditation is the contemplation of the Scriptures² and other texts of their sacred writings. This occurs with greater emphasis during *Reasoning* ceremonies and the *Binghis*. Through meditation of Scriptures, Rastas believe that they can achieve the "I-and-I." The term describes the cultivation of a "mystical consciousness of oneself and Jah" that enables the

¹*Nyabinghi* in the *Nande* language means "mother of abundance" or "one who possesses many things."

²In general, Rastas' reading of Scriptures is selective. They tend to choose some parts of the Bible (especially Leviticus) and leave out others.

understanding of the true meaning of the Bible (McAlister, 2024, para. 3).

Dreadlocks

When used in association to hairs, locks describe a portion of hair that grows, hangs or clings together in a natural way, that is, without cutting, combing, brushing, but by simply washing it with pure water (Kos, 2019, para. 40). Rastas add the prefix 'dread' to qualify Rastafarian locks given that, in Rastafarianism, dreadlocks are associated to the fear of the Lord and the fear Rastas conveyed by their look in the early days of the movement. This sense of dread is more intensified in Rastafarianism especially as dreadlocks are considered the symbol of the Lion of Judah (Kos, 2019, para. 30).

In the Rastafari movement, wearing of dreadlocks is done not for esthetical purposes but for spiritual reasons. It is a sacred act that expresses devotion and consecration to Jah. For Rastas, dreadlocks play a similar function to that which hair played in fulfilling a Nazarite vow in the Old Testament. They believed that dreadlocks are supported by Leviticus 21:5 ("They shall not make baldness upon their head, neither shall they shave off the corner of their beard . . .") and Numbers 6:5-6 that reads: "All the days of his vow of separation no razor shall come upon his head; until the time is completed for which he separates himself to the LORD, he shall be holy; he shall let the locks of hair of his head grow long" (RSV). Hence, it becomes sacrilegious for a Rasta to shave his head or to be coerced to do so.

Dreadlocks also symbolize the spiritual journey that Rastas take in the process of locking their hair which demands patience. Growing hairlocks teaches patience (a key virtue in the Rastafari movement) and, as such, constitutes in and by itself a "journey of the mind, soul, and spirituality" (Kos, 2019, para. 40). The journey that is imposed by the growth of dreadlocks is capital in that, by the time hairs are locked,

considerable time would have elapsed and one who wears them would have grown in patience.

Life Style, Values, and Diet

Rastafarians are known for their simplicity. They “live a peaceful life, needing little material possessions and devote themselves to contemplating the Scriptures” (Barbados Tourism Encyclopedia, n. d, para. 4). The most important Rastafari sacred Scriptures are the *Holy Piby*, the *King James’ Bible*, the *Promise Key*, the *Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy*, and the *Kebrá Negast* (it is the national epic of the Ethiopian State and literally means, ‘glory of the kings’) (Jamaicans.com, 2003d, para. 1).

Rastafarians are “fighters.” They “fight” not necessarily in terms of an exhibition of physical violence, but in the sense that they are almost all the time involved in a struggle for their rights. They stand for their rights (as Bob Marley sang) in their speeches, preaching, and, especially, by means of their reggae lyrics. Of note is the fact that reggae has been a strong vector for the conveyance of Rastafari ideology and struggle.

Rastafarians value family and community lives. They emphasize family health and cohesion. Roles in the family are well defined with males being the head and females and children occupying secondary positions. They also lay a great emphasis on communal life. That is, they are driven by a collective philosophy of life that places sharing and community activities at the heart of their societal organization.

In terms of diet, Rastafarians follow strict dietary laws. In general, they only eat *I-tal* foods. The term derives from the English word “vital” and describes food that is as natural as possible. *I-tal* foods are largely inspired by Hebrew dietary laws. They include unpreserved foods, food that is predominantly raw, and food that has no chemical additives. It is important to observe that Rastafarians tend to avoid meat (especially pork),

alcohol, tobacco (it is considered unnatural), coffee, and salt. This is in keeping with their principle of livity.

Livity is a vital aspect Rastas' living. It is a principle that highlights balance and natural lifestyle. Elisabeth McAlister (2024) explains that the principle of livity incorporates the "wearing of long hair locked in its natural, uncombed state, dressing in the colours of red, green, gold, and black ... and eating an 'I-tal' (natural, vegetarian) diet" (para. 3). In this light, livity sums up much of Rastas philosophy of life and daily practices.

Missional Strategies for Reaching Rastafarians

The mission of making disciples of Christ of nations (Matthew 28:18-20) includes reaching out to the Rastafari population. However, given their unique beliefs, worldviews, life philosophy, and lifestyle, it is important that those who witness Christ to Rastafarians tailor their missional strategies in a way that makes sense to them and speaks to their beliefs system. This entails understanding who Rastas are and adopting missionary communication accordingly. In this article, I suggest, amongst others, that missions' activists to Rastafarians take into consideration the following seven recommendations:

Drop prejudices, stereotypes, clichés, and other forms of otherizations against Rastafarians

Like the case is with several other minority groups, Rastafarians are often misunderstood, misrepresented, and their ideology misconstrued. Most often, there is tendency to look at them as hooligans, drug addicts, abnormal, or near-insane, persons. These common delineations of Rastafarians are far from the truth. Rastafarians are not crazy. They are not mentally deranged. They are not hoodlums, freaks, drunks, drug-addicts, or people landing from a different planet. They are right-minded people created in God's image that are struggling for their rights and the recovery as well as recognition of their

identity. An important step towards reaching them with Christ consists in recognizing them as such and approaching them as *whole* humans, without suspicion, and disdain. Marginalizing, pre-judging, stereotyping, or otherizing Rastafarians because their ways are judged “strange,” “subversive,” and “unbecoming” in “normal” society only helps drive them towards a life of socio-cultural ghettoization. These negative social dispositions anchored in social clichés have the potential of erecting significant barriers between them and any gospel herald intending to make disciples of Christ among them. This reminds me of the case of a Rastafarian (with long dreadlocks) who, some years back, visited a local church I pastored on a Sunday worship service. The outright attitudes of suspicion, judgmentalism, and you-don’t-belong-here with which some church members welcomed him that morning sent him away from the church for good. Although, I later tried so hard to reach out to him with the gospel, his refusal to give in and return to the fellowship was categorical as felt that he was a *persona non grata* in church. He pointed to the exclusivist and judgmental attitudes of church members as the rationale for his refusal.

Use Reggae in communicating the gospel

Reggae is emblematic of Rastafari. It is one of the key vehicles of Rastas self-identification and self-expression. To a certain extent, Reggae is a trademark of Rastafari. It is through this medium that the movement “conquered” the world especially in the 1970s, gaining worldwide acceptance. Rastas who are musicians used it (and still do so) as a tool of resistance against Western imperialism, colonialism, slavery, political despotism, racial intolerance against the Blacks, and as a platform for decrying the miserable conditions of Black people. Through it, they gave a voice to the oppressed, disenfranchised, and marginalized of the society, most of them Blacks. In this light, to effectively communicate Christ to Rastas, using Reggae is vital. As a means of communication that is born within specific socio-cultural realities (Rastafari resistance to White oppression) and is meant to speak *to, for, and about* these

realities, Reggae is particularly adapted to speak to Rastas since they viscerally identify with it. Accordingly, to be intelligible and hope to make disciples of Christ among Rastas, missions' activists should write and sing Christian songs that espouse both the rhythm and philosophy undergirding Reggae music. This way, they can open Rastas up to the gospel message and hope that this message bears fruits among them.

Use a Scripture-meditation approach (SMA)

Rastas have a strong proclivity for meditation. They relish the practice. Meditation is the foundation of the *Reasoning* which, as noted earlier, is a ceremony that assembles Rastas of a specific locality for purposes of reflection. From this perspective, a meditation-based approach to witnessing Christ such as the SMA may find a favorable echo among them. From the moment communication is established with Rastas, missionaries may consider embarking them in sessions of meditation on Scripture if they (Rastas) are willing. Guided meditation (or other forms of meditation) may be a useful tool in the process. In this method of meditation, a passage of the Scripture is read severally. Participants are enjoined to give their perspectives/understanding of the passage. In the course of the meditation, the leader of the session moderates and guides the meditation as he or she seeks to establish the *mens scriptoris* (the original meaning that the author of a text sought to convey) and to highlight its contemporary applicational relevance. In this hermeneutical process (unearthing the original intention of the author of a text and seeking to apply the text in today's contexts), missionaries can lovingly and astutely lead their hearers to Christ.

Use their Bible-anchored terminologies and Bible passages of predilection as a bridge for presenting Christ to them

Rastas read the Bible, especially the KJV which is one of their sacred books. From there, they have extracted several terms that form the substratum of their belief systems and theology.

The most prominent among these terms include Zion, Messiah, Promise Land, chosen ones, the twelve tribes of Israel, Babylon, and Jah. Besides this nomenclature, Rastas often quote Bible passages to substantiate their beliefs. Such is the case, for instance, with Leviticus 21:5 and Numbers 6:5-6 that are used as a support for dreadlocks as well as Genesis 3:18 and Psalms 104:4 that are viewed as a biblical support the spiritual use of for *ganja* (herbs). Missionaries can use these passages and many others of their predilection as a bridge for presenting Christ to them. It is a proven missiological fact that God has always preceded the missionary in cultures and religions of the world and left traces of His presence there. These traces are often described as *vestigia Dei* (God's traces). It is a missionary's responsibility, once in a culture, to discern them and use them as spring boards for communicating the gospel. Rastas' love for the KJV, their use of specific biblical terms and passages may be seen as *vestigia Dei* that can serve as a bridge for revealing Christ to them.

De-Babylonize gospel presentations

In Rastafari parlance, Babylon is the materialistic, corrupt, colonialist, abusive, wicked, and oppressive culture of the Whites that has, for centuries, dominated, exploited, and subjected the Blacks. Hence, they resent anything that is associated with the Whiteman's culture or, in some ways, participate in its imperialistic agenda in the world. Given that, historically, it is a known fact that, during the period of Western expansion and colonialism, Christian missions, in some places of the world, was a close ally of Western hegemonic agendas (Bosh, [1991] 2011, p. 1; Yates, 1994, p. 7; Bellini, 2017, p. 3), missionaries need to approach Rastas with the consciousness that the latter may evoke this vicious historical participation of Christianity in Western dominance as a reason for resenting Christianity. Moreover, even when Christian missionaries did not directly partake in the Western imperial conquest but rather combated it as was the case, for instance, with Bartolome de Las Casas (1484-1566) among Red Indians, the deficient

contextual sensitivity of some missionaries in their communication of Christ often left the locals with the feeling that Christianity was essentially the religion of the Whites. As a result of this lack of contextuality in many West-generated missionary endeavors that tended to confuse Western culture with Christian culture and to superimpose Western culture on their non-Western converts as being the Christian culture, much of Christianity that resulted was strongly Westernized in thought, form, and practice. The Western tint on today's Christianity still remains, to large extent, perceptible across the globe. In this light, Rastas tend to view Christianity, especially its Western version, as an instrument of White dominance. This explains why, in the periods of the Rastafari inception and heydays, some Rastas created Black churches as an alternative to the "Babylonized" (Westernized) white churches.

It follows that, to effectively communicate the gospel to Rastas in a way that highlights God's indiscriminate love for the Black race and the sense of dignity that Christ's gospel confers to them as well as every other human being, missionary should seek, as much as it is feasible, to de-Babylonized their gospel presentation. This means removing from gospel presentation, elements that make the gospel to look or sound Western or to uphold the agenda of Western-centric dominance. De-babylonizing the communication of the gospel may necessitate that missionaries consider the following:

a. Show Rastas that Christianity is not a white man religion. Christianity is from the East. This is a historical fact. Both its founder (Christ) and primitive promoters (early-Christ followers) were from the middle East. They later brought the gospel to Europe. That being the case, equating the origination and essence of Christianity to the West is both fallacious and anachronistic.

b. Highlight the place of Africa in God's kingdom-redemption agenda. From Genesis to

Revelation, Africa is given an important position. This is evident in the life of the Patriarchs, Israel, and the Lord Jesus. Missionaries need to show Rastas that are Afrocentric that God's perspective towards Africa is radically different from how the West perceived the continent, and to a certain extent, still perceive Africans today.

c. Present the gospel to Rastas in African forms as much as possible. This entails developing contextual approaches to gospel presentation that ensure Africans that one can be truly African and truly Christian.

d. If need be, apologize for the participation of some missionaries in the Western imperialistic program. The ills of slavery and colonization are ruthless and inhumane. Their scars are deeply ingrained in the collective African consciousness. It is unfortunate that some nominal Christians partook in this gruesome venture. Missionaries must recognize these ills inflicted on the Black and apologize for it when necessary. However, it is important to highlight that missionary activities are not always representative of Christ. That some missionaries were ruthless towards the Black race does not mean that this is the way of Christ. Making this dichotomy (missionary/Christ) is important since adepts of Christianity do not always mirror Christ and his teachings.

e. Emphasize that many Christians (ordinary members, ministers, missionaries, etc.) both Whites and Blacks opposed slavery, colonialism, racial discrimination, and the dominance of the West over the Rest as a whole. The general trend of God-fearing Christians was to oppose Western imperialism. Several Christians consecrated their lives to fighting

Black slavery and colonialism. Prominent among them are names such as Gaspard Da Cruz (1520-1570), John Wesley (1703-1791), Parliamentarian William Wilberforce (1759-1833)³, Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892), Theodore S. Wright (1797-1847), Charles G. Finney (1792-1875), Theodore Weld (1803-1895), Lyman Beecher (1775-1863), Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896), Sojourner Truth (died in 1883), George Bourne (1780-1845), George B. Cheever (1807-1890), Daniel O'Connell (1755-1847), Charles Lenox Remond (1810-1873), Rosa Parks (1913-2005), Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968), and many others. It is important to also note that the Quakers spearheaded the creation of the *Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade* in 1787 to fight the enslavement of Blacks. Three well-known Quakers who dedicated their entire lives to the cause of abolishing Black slavery are Benjamin Lay (1682-1759), John Woolman (1720-1772), and Anthony Benezet (1713-1784).

Adopt a holistic approach to gospel communication

Rastafarians are mostly *this-worldly* in ideology and emphasis. Chief among their struggle is the restoration of the identity and dignity of the Blacks as well as the betterment of their social, economic and financial conditions. Owing to centuries of ruthless Western exploitation and domination, Black people, in their majority, have been kept in abject poverty and reduced to endemic misery although the continent to which they identify (Africa) is rich in natural resources and other wealth-generating assets. Besides denouncing the ills of Western imperialism,

³Through Wilberforce's 20 years of relentless combat in the British parliament against the British slave trade, he succeeded to cause the *Slave Trade Act 1807* to be voted in the 1806 election. Officially known as *An Act for the Abolition of Slave Trade*, the *Slave Trade Act 1807* was an act issued by the United Kingdom Parliament that that prohibited the practice of slave trade across the British Empire.

gospel ministers to Rastafarians should equally seek to transform their lives for the better. This entails implementing holistic missionary strategies that merge gospel presentation and social action, especially sustainable transformational development. Holistic gospel presentations avoid an exclusive *that-worldly* gospel communication and is driven by the conviction that preaching Christ aims at not just saving souls but saving lives.

Adopt a life of simplicity and communalism

In general, Rastas lead an extremely simple life. They eat *I-tal* foods, are comfortable with little material possessions, and seek to be as close to nature as possible. That is, to their possible best, they avoid what is artificial. In addition, they have a strong inclination towards community life and sharing. Missions' activists among Rastas should take this reality into full cognizance and conduct themselves appropriately. This may concretely mean that they avoid displays of luxury and materialism and abstain from the frenetic quest for hoarding money that characterizes contemporary societies which have, to a great extent, patterned themselves after Western individualistic and capitalistic models.

Conclusion

This research gave a close scrutiny to the Rastafari movement. It aimed at understanding the movement and outlining missional strategies that enable an intelligible and effective communication of Christ to its adepts. The research hinged on four main points. The first point examined the name as well as origin of the Rastafari movement and briefly surveys its historical development. The second point explored its fundamental teachings. The third point investigated its basic practices. The final point recommended creative approaches for sharing Christ with Rastas in missionary contexts.

From the investigation done so far, it has become clear that the Rastafari movement is a community with its unique culture. It is distinct in its worldviews, belief systems, values, interests, existential struggles, lifestyle, worship, etc. In this light, missionary activities among Rastas should consider their peculiarities and adapt accordingly. This requires not only knowing who they are from an intellectual standpoint, but also incarnating among them to see the world from their perspective and communicate Christ to them from their realities.

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