

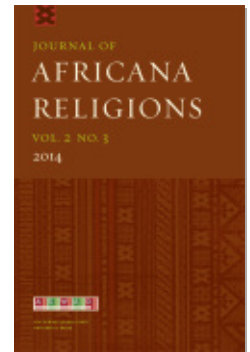


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the Rastafari

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Notes

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The Cultural Production of a Black Messiah: Ethiopianism and the Rastafari

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Abstract

Many of the Rastafari people claim that Emperor Haile Selassie I of Ethiopia is godly. This article explains how the idea of a Black Messiah was culturally produced in the context of Ethiopianist ideology.

It sketches the various expressions of Ethiopianism and some of its leading exponents in the United States, Jamaica, and Central and South Africa in order to show why the notion of a Black and African Messiah made sense to a number of Jamaicans. Ethiopianists combined race, scripture, historical experience, religiosity, and social criticism in a way that made possible the formulation of a durable and compelling Black Messiah. The Ethiopianist formulations circulating through Kingston, Jamaica, during the 1920s provided the cultural resources for a new identification—Rastafari—as a way of being and being recognized in the world.

Keywords: Rastafari, Ethiopianism, Emperor Haile Selassie I, Jamaica, Black identity

These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful.

—Revelation 17:14 (KJB)

This black king's Capitol will be at Jerusalem. He shall roar out of Zion and utter his voice from Jerusalem and he will be the hope of his people in that day all nations will desire him, regardless him being a Negro king. . . . The black race will have the greatest hope for him; because the black race is more oppressed, more segregated more discriminated against on account of their Hamitic blood.

—James Webb, *A Black Man Will Be the Coming Universal King*

On Friday, March 16, 1934, Leonard Howell and Robert Hinds, founding evangelists of the Rastafari gospel, were in the fourth day of their trial for sedition in a Jamaican court. They were on trial because they promoted a message that threatened Jamaica's colonial status quo: Black Jamaicans should transfer their loyalty from Britain's King George V to King Ras Tafari of Ethiopia. They preached that King Ras Tafari was Christ returned to redeem Black people and to inaugurate a new and just order.¹ Jamaica's national newspaper, the *Daily Gleaner*, which covered the trial, reported that "Howell said that it was prophesied that in the days of the kings of the earth, Jehovah would raise up a king with a righteous government . . . that Christ would return to earth as the

Messiah, in the flesh; and that they would be able to see Him, and touch Him, and eat with HIM.”²

The courtroom audience erupted into laughter whenever Howell or Hinds described King Ras Tafari as the Messiah returned. “What nonsense,” the laughter must have communicated. Christ returned as an African king? How could anyone subscribe to such beliefs? The middle and upper classes believed that working-class and poor Black people were intellectually inferior and prone to delusion; even many poor Black Jamaicans found the idea absurd. So, only the most foolish among fools could be smitten by such “nonsense.”

Culturally speaking, however, the idea of a Black Messiah or a Black Christ was erected on solid ground. The epigraphs to this article speak to the cultural resources that have been marshaled and the interpretations that have been fashioned to create an alluring narrative about how and why the intervention of a Black Messiah is at hand. The first quote is John of Patmos’s prophetic vision about the fate of the Messiah (the Lord of lords and King of kings) and his *chosen* people in their struggle against wicked kingdoms. The second quote, from Reverend James Webb, illustrates how the Book of Revelation (and the Bible), as a cultural resource, could be tailored by a particular people to serve their own ends. The idea of a Black Messiah made sense within the cultural paradigm of Ethiopianism. I argue that Ethiopianists combined together race, scripture, historical experience, religiosity, and social criticism in ways that made enduring and compelling ideas of a Black Messiah or Christ possible. These resources could also be fashioned into an identity, which the adherents of King Ras Tafari, the Rastafari of Jamaica, did. Edward Blum and Paul Harvey show exquisitely how in the United States people created Christ in their own likenesses as well as how particular conceptions of Christ were historically contingent.³ Here we examine a lesser-known narrative, Ethiopianism, and how it was used to craft and give life to a Black Messiah concerned with the desires of Black people.

Ethiopianism is a type of “exodus politics” according to political theorist Michael Walzer: biblical conceptions of redemption, liberation, and deliverance that manifest in politically salient thoughts and acts. The Rastafari and the Ethiopianists before them imagined themselves as having been forcibly removed from their homeland, enduring captivity in the wilderness (the New World) and awaiting redemption and deliverance into

the Promised Land (Africa-home). Exodus politics call for a “miraculous transformation of the material world.”⁴ However, Walzer continues, what is *really* needed and what Ethiopianist exodus politics *really* do is to set “God’s people marching through the world toward a better place within it.”⁵ In this article, I chart some of the ideas, people, and events that led up to Black Jamaicans of the 1920s expecting an embodied Black Messiah who would signal a new order and, hence, motivate people to begin marching toward that better place in the world. First, let me give context to the Rastafari.

“Redemption Draweth Nigh”: A King Becomes Emperor

On November 2, 1930, King Ras Tafari was crowned emperor of Ethiopia and changed his name to Haile Selassie, meaning “power of the trinity.” The emperor’s official titles included the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, among others. Ethiopian dynastic traditions trace their lineage to King David of Judah, his son King Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba.⁶ The *Daily Gleaner* ran many stories about King Ras Tafari and Ethiopia in the months leading up to his coronation. More than a few Black Jamaicans were closely following the coverage. They noted that international dignitaries attended the king’s coronation, that the lavish and ancient rituals were dripping with Christian and Ethiopian symbols, and that references were made to the king’s royal lineage tracing to Old Testament times. Behaviors taken for granted by European elites, such as the duke of Gloucester bowing in obeisance before the emperor, were interpreted by Black Jamaican lay analysts and budding prophets as Britain showing its deference to the new Messiah. The king, after all, had claimed a string of titles identified in Revelation. The analysts and prophets concluded: “And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.”⁷

Several men became convinced that King Ras Tafari’s coronation signaled redemption time, and they initiated the work of creating a faith, an identity, and a people—the Rastafari. Leonard Howell is held to be the “first Rasta,” but he was one among many proclaiming the divinity of King Ras Tafari.⁸ Robert Hinds had posited the idea of a Black Christ before Leonard Howell arrived in Jamaica in 1932, through his experience with the minister Alexander Bedward. Archibald Dunkley, an ardent Ethiopianist, returned to Jamaica in

1930.⁹ Dunkley claimed that King Ras Tafari was the “Black Christ returned in the flesh, in his Kingly character,” “the Son of the Living God.”¹⁰ Nathaniel Hibbert returned to Jamaica from Costa Rica in 1931; he soon founded the Ethiopian Coptic faith and sometimes preached with Howell. Annie and David Harvey returned from Ethiopia to Jamaica in 1930, and they brought back with them firsthand experience of Ethiopia to a populace hungering for knowledge about Ethiopia and the king.

These men and women organized around the idea that King Ras Tafari was divine—the Black Messiah embodied in mortal flesh. Howell incorporated Annie Harvey’s and the other evangelists’ views into his own, quickly making himself the most prominent spokesperson for the message that promoted King Ras Tafari, then Emperor Selassie I, as Messiah and Redeemer.

Ethiopianism: The Idea

In 1611, when scholars presented the King James Bible to the English public, “Ethiopian” was understood to refer to a dark-skinned person of the African continent, also known then as Aethiopia.¹¹ Reference to African-descended people as Ethiopian was common in the United States and England well into the 1800s, being used, for example, by white abolitionists.¹²

Ethiopianism describes a particular view among African-descended people. Ethiopianists believe that Black people are a special people, subjugated but confident that God will redeem them. From a standpoint of scholarship, Ethiopianism is a racial and religious ideology prone to politicization.¹³ Ethiopianism is not a single or unified doctrine. It is a pliable cultural resource, tailored to specific places, times, and populations of Blacks. Ethiopianism has exerted significant influence in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa. Despite Ethiopianism’s eclecticism, we can identify consistent themes that exemplify it.

A racialized analysis of scripture and history is common to the variants of Ethiopianism. The focus of Psalms 68:31 on Ethiopia stretching out her hand to God is nearly always cited in discussions of Ethiopianism. It is commonly understood as a sign of Black redemption. For example, the African Civilization Society (1858–1869), a back-to-Africa association, quoted the verse in its constitution, thus connecting repatriation with redemption.¹⁴ Other Ethiopianist themes include the idea that the symbolic kinship of Black people comes through the line of King David, that Africa is

the ancestral and spiritual home of Black people, that Black people should repatriate to Africa, that Black people's venerable histories were disregarded by white supremacists, that whites will be punished by God for their mistreatment of Blacks, and that the returned Messiah will redeem Black people.

From the start, Ethiopianism was millenarian and messianic. Ethiopianists predicted the fall of slavery, white people, and the West, and they anticipated the redemption of Blacks and Africa, all under the eyes of a righteous God who had promised their transition from victims to victors. Ethiopianism was a means to explain the immorality of oppression and injustice as well as why Black people suffered both for so long.

Developing under the regime of chattel slavery, Ethiopianism became entangled with Black people's quest for liberation and freedom. As enslaved people gained access to the Bible and formed critiques of slavery, they literally and figuratively identified with biblical history and characters. They defined themselves as Israelites reincarnate, forcibly removed from their homeland, adrift in the wilderness, searching for a promised land and a righteous order. Enslaved people interpreted Europeans as a contemporary manifestation of Pharaoh's inhumane cruelty.

Because Ethiopianism valorized blackness, it was a counterbalance to white supremacy and Black subjugation. It provided a way to address miseducation and deracination; it was a pillar around which Black people could bond. If whites would not acknowledge a civilized history for Black people, then Black people would create it themselves, would give themselves the heritages that they both lost and were denied.

How did Ethiopianism develop, spread, and persist? Organizations and voluntary associations facilitate the durability of ideas and identities through time.¹⁵ Ethiopianism was practiced and embodied in churches, Masonic halls, meetings, and voluntary associations. It was communicated through cultural products such as slave narratives, sermons, poems, hymns, broadsheets, pamphlets, booklets, and books.¹⁶ Let us now examine some of the ways in which Ethiopianism was expressed.

A Sketch of Ethiopianism in Practice

Ethiopianism traces back to at least the final third of the 1700s in the thirteen colonies and in Jamaica. As the trade in African bodies gained momentum and scale from the early 1500s on, Europeans needed justification for the barbarous

institution that flouted their democratic principles and Christian faith. In this context, ideas such as the Hamitic thesis gained currency. The Hamitic thesis claimed that Ham's son Canaan and his offspring were cursed by Noah (Ham's father) and God to suffer servitude for a period of time. African-descended people were marked as Canaan's progeny, cursed to serve as slaves to the descendants of Ham's brothers Shem and Japheth (respectively, the biblical progenitors of Europeans and Semites).

Ethiopianism in the United States

In both the North and the South, various African Americans propagated Ethiopianism. A distinguished early Ethiopianist was Prince Hall of Boston, Massachusetts. Hall, an active abolitionist and supporter of repatriation, is best known for cofounding the first Black Freemason society in the West. Hall penned, in 1792, his *Charges to the Lodge at Charlestowne*. In it he cited Psalms 68:31 as portent of the redemption of Blacks and Africa, and he referred to Black people as chosen people, comparable to the Israelites.¹⁷ Hall's Freemason brother, John Marrant, preached what Joanna Brooks has described as a "Zionist covenant theology which centered on displaced Black peoples as the subjects of a prophetic history" to the refugee Black loyalist community in Nova Scotia.¹⁸ Marrant identified paradise with Ethiopia.¹⁹

George Liele, an enslaved man, was busy propagating Ethiopianism in the American South. The first officially ordained Black minister in the United States, Liele began preaching to a congregation of mostly enslaved people in Silver Bluff, South Carolina, around 1774.²⁰ Liele referred to himself and his members as Ethiopians, and he drew on Psalms 68 and 69 as sources of comfort, inspiration, and identity.²¹ Liele was fond of Psalms 69:33–36: "For the Lord heareth the poor, and despiseth not his prisoners. . . . For God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah: that they may dwell there, and have it in possession."²² David and Averett Shannon describe Liele as the founder of the independent Black church movement and the progenitor of a nascent "black theology of liberation."²³ In 1778, Liele moved from Silver Bluff to Savannah, Georgia. There he helped organize a Black congregation, probably the first Black church in the United States (ca. 1777 or 1788). A comrade of the British Loyalists, Liele fled Savannah in 1782 to escape slavers and Patriots, accompanying a group of Loyalists to Jamaica. A free man in Jamaica, Liele established Jamaica's first Black church, the Ethiopian Baptist Church, in 1784. Black independent churches sprang from Liele's effort.²⁴

David Walker and Robert Young codified the themes of Ethiopianism. Walker's *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World* (1829) criticized slavery and the American Colonization Society's relocation scheme, claimed that the condition of Black people in the United States was worse than that of Israelites under Pharaoh, and claimed that the country was bound to fall because of its depravity.²⁵ Walker urged defiant resistance against the unjust social order. The *Appeal* was banned because whites feared that it would incite Blacks to violence.²⁶ Also in 1829, Young published his *Ethiopian Manifesto*, a messianic tract criticizing white supremacy and calling for Black unity. Young prophesized: "As came John the Baptist, of old, to spread abroad the forthcoming of his master, . . . [we] denote to the black African or Ethiopian people, that God has prepared for them a leader, who awaits but his season to proclaim to them his birthright."²⁷ Both Walker and Young believed white society was corrupt and perched on a crumbling edifice, a modern Babylon that would self-destruct under the inscrutable gaze of a soon-to-come Messiah.

The early versions of Ethiopianism have been described as "romantic racialism" owing to their promotion of the idea that Black people were "special," the antithesis of whites.²⁸ In the romantic view, Black exceptionalism was exemplified by propensity for spiritual awareness, hard work, independence, and a community-focused ethic. Whites were destructive, selfish, deceitful, and individualistic. Romantic Ethiopianists could point out the paradox of how whites professed themselves to be moral and godly people and yet also enslaved, dispossessed, and deprived people in some of the wickedest ways imaginable.

By the mid-1800s in the United States, Ethiopianists were developing a secular orientation. Black intellectuals such as Henry Garnet, Edward Blyden, Alexander Crummel, and Henry McNeal Turner shifted to a focus on upliftment, civilizing, and redemption.²⁹ They argued for Black self-reliance, repatriation to Africa, and the economic and spiritual development of African societies. Turner, an African Methodist Episcopal minister and politician, unapologetically articulated the view that God is a Negro. "We have as much right biblically and otherwise," Turner proclaimed, "to believe that God is a Negro, as you buckra or white people have to believe that God is a fine looking, symmetrical and ornamented white man."³⁰

Ethiopianism effloresced during the 1890s. In the United States, interest in Ethiopianism was fed by the victory of the Ethiopians over the Italians at the Battle of Adwa in 1896, the dismantling of Reconstruction, and the resurgence in white supremacy in forms such as race "science" and lynching, further propelled by court decisions such as *Plessey v. Ferguson*.

Ethiopianism in Jamaica

In Jamaica, Ethiopianism was propagated through the proselytizing of George Liele, Moses Baker, and others, beginning in the 1780s, though it may have been planted before they arrived. The influence of Ethiopianism on Black Jamaicans could be readily identified in acts of rebellion, which were associated with religious organizations and saturated with religious symbols. For example, Baptist preacher Sam Sharpe and his flock referred to themselves as Black Israelites during their planning of the 1831 rebellion of enslaved Jamaicans known as the Baptist War. Thirty-four years later, Native Baptist preacher Paul Bogle urged Black unity against white supremacy and the institutions that oppressed them when he led a band of Black Jamaicans in the Morant Bay uprising.³¹ Bogle, and his teacher in ministry, George Gordon, cast the oppressive Jamaican institutions as Pharaoh.³²

Toward the end of the 1800s, Native Baptist preacher and Ethiopianist Alexander Bedward gained prominence. Bedward utilized Ethiopianist tropes while condemning British rule and tooting his own horn as a Black prophet and Christ. Bedward threatened—symbolically at least—a violent confrontation with the white establishment in Jamaica. After several skirmishes with the colonial authorities, they liquidated him by imprisoning him in an asylum, where he died, a scant few days before the coronation of King Ras Tafari.

Between 1914 and the 1930s, Jamaican Marcus Garvey propagated Ethiopianism in the United States and Jamaica through the Black nationalism of his United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garvey's Black nationalism was respectful of spiritual concerns—echoing Turner's view that Black people should see God through their own lenses—but decidedly secular in its focus on politics, economics, pan-Africanism, and the building of vibrant organizations that could forcibly represent the interests of Black people.

Ethiopianism in Africa

Ethiopianism traveled across the seas to Africa through print media and Black religious organizers. Africans were traveling to the United States by the end of the 1800s, learning about Ethiopianism, and returning to Africa racially conscious. James Dwane visited the United States in 1896 to connect with the

African Methodist Episcopal church. Dwane met Henry Turner in the United States, which led Turner to visit South Africa and galvanize the emergent Black independent church movement there. Daniel Thwaite, in his analysis of pre-World War II Black nationalism in Africa, superciliously noted how Turner and Ethiopianism exacerbated an emergent rebelliousness among the Africans of Southern Africa, “holding up to scorn those who affirmed that the blacks were a decadent race, recalling the past greatness of Ethiopia, . . . prophesying the advent of the black races on a day soon to dawn, whenever they shook off their long sleep. . . . He rhetorically merged Ethiopia into all Africa, all Africa into Ethiopia.”³³ In Thwaite’s view, Turner provided the spark that turned Ethiopianism into a national movement in South Africa.³⁴

By the early 1900s, whites in Southern and Central Africa were no longer scornfully ridiculing Ethiopianism but had instead become alarmed because the movement challenged white supremacy, sometimes violently. Joseph Chilembwe of Nyasaland, Central Africa, learned about Ethiopianism during his education in the United States. In 1915, Chilembwe led a small band of fellow Central Africans in a murderous rebellion against British settlers. His aim was to encourage Africans to rebel against the European colonizers and take Africa for the Africans.

The 1920s in Jamaica

In 1927, Marcus Garvey was deported from the United States to his birthplace, Jamaica. What he found upon his return probably displeased him. The hegemonic brand of Ethiopianism bubbling in Kingston and surrounding areas was of the romantic variety and had been woven into many of the Black religions. It tugged vigorously and perhaps triumphantly against Garvey’s secular Ethiopianism. It survived Garvey and Garveyism while simultaneously accommodating Garvey and Garveyism (the Rastafari, for instance, regarded Garvey as a prophet while Garvey rejected them).

During the 1920s, Black Jamaicans began reweaving their Ethiopianist tapestry. Influences from the United States were integral to the revision. One new thread in the tapestry was James Webb’s *A Black Man Will Be the Coming Universal King*. Published in 1919 but conceived far earlier, the tract made a case for why the Messiah of Revelation would be a Black man. Webb argued that “this [Messiah] king will be a black man (Negro or Colored) and a Universal

King forever, Jacob on his dying bed prophesied that this coming King would be an offspring from his son Judah.”³⁵ Webb was an ardent Garveyite. He gave lectures on race and God in the UNIA venue Liberty Hall in New York City in 1921, and he advertised and published his work in the UNIA’s *Negro World* (which was banned in Jamaica). Lore has it that Black seamen would deliver banned media like *Negro World* to Jamaica during their visits.

A second new thread involved Robert Athlyi Rogers, an Anguillan, who moved to the United States where he set up his own missionary church, the Afro-Athlican Constructive Gaathly. Rogers wrote a tract, *The Holy Piby*, sometime between 1913 and 1917, and he published it himself in 1924.³⁶ Rogers’s screed argued that Ethiopians were God’s chosen people, that Jesus the redeemer was Black, and that Ethiopia was the Promised Land. In the mid-1920s, Rogers established a branch of his Afro-Athlican church in Jamaica. Dubbed the Hamitic Church, it received a warm welcome from a Kingston civic group and the president of the Kingston UNIA.³⁷ However, by 1926, geniality had evaporated. The UNIA accused the Hamitic Church of using Garvey’s name to promote their missionary work. Garvey was not promoting a Black God; Rogers was. The UNIA became anxious to distance themselves from Rogers because *the Gleaner* (also known as *Daily Gleaner*) had acquired a copy of the *Holy Piby* and bashed it ruthlessly in an editorial column, calling it the “new Ethiopian religion” and the bible of the Garveyites.³⁸

A third new thread in the Ethiopianist tapestry of 1920s Jamaica involved Fitz Balantine Pettersburgh, a minister from Antigua who traveled from the United States to Jamaica in 1924 to teach and do religious organizing. Pettersburgh was the author of the Ethiopianist screed entitled *The Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy*.³⁹ Pettersburgh used the notion of Black supremacy to augur the ascendancy of Ethiopia, Ethiopians, and the Black God: “We are the foundation stones of the resurrection of the Kingdom of Ethiopia,” he proclaimed.⁴⁰ The *Gleaner* had also caught wind of *The Royal Parchment Scroll*, designating it a companion volume to the *Holy Piby*.⁴¹ Pettersburgh would later copreach with founding Rastafari evangelist Leonard Howell during the Rastafari’s first year of existence.

A fourth new thread, a particularly important one in the tapestry, was loosely connected to the aforementioned three. It led directly to the emergence of the Rastafari. Annie and David Harvey left Jamaica in 1924 to do missionary work in Ethiopia; they also traveled the major circuits of the Black diaspora of the time—Panama, Costa Rica, New York City. It was in New York that they

probably became familiar with Arnold Ford and the Black Jews. Arnold Ford and a band of African-descended people from the United States and the Caribbean moved to Ethiopia in the early 1930s.⁴² Just as the wave of pioneers began to arrive in Ethiopia, Annie and David had returned to Jamaica. They returned to Jamaica with firsthand information about King Ras Tafari and Ethiopia. Leonard Howell, who had returned to Jamaica from New York on November 17, 1932, immediately searched out the Harveys. Oral testimony has it that it was the Harveys who instructed Howell about Ethiopia and King Ras Tafari; they also gave him the photograph of King Ras Tafari that Howell in turn used to show people what their Messiah looked like, selling copies for a shilling or so each.⁴³ Annie advertised herself and her services in the *Daily Gleaner* using the title “the Israelite healer.”⁴⁴

Annie and David sought to develop their own community around Annie’s conception of race, revival religion, and healing. However, the colonial authorities were not having it. Police surveilled Annie and David, and they were arrested multiple times for violating Jamaica’s Obeah Act and Medical Law Act. Revival, an amalgam of Christianity and African-derived practices, emphasizes both supernatural and physical healing. The colonial authorities designated revival healing arts as sorcery and quackery and created laws to punish practitioners. In March 1934, Rastafari evangelists Leonard Howell and Robert Hinds were on trial for sedition; Annie and David began their court appearances during the same month, continuing to appear into the summer, getting guilty verdicts at each step of the legal process. I have yet to find print evidence that demonstrates that the Harveys were versed in Ethiopianism, though there is no reason to believe otherwise. After all, they did migrate to Ethiopia, and they were likely aware of Ford’s teaching that King Ras Tafari was the spiritual father of Africans and African-descended peoples. The Harveys may even have encouraged Howell to begin his Rastafari organizing and preaching in the parish of St. Thomas.

St. Thomas was a fertile and propitious site for sowing the seeds of Rastafari. Black St. Thomasians were already known for their Black consciousness. Moreover, they continued to endure the kinds of oppression that had motivated Bogle to initiate a deadly battle against “the system.” For example, the peasants of the area were taxed heavily by landlords, but the peasants had no means to pay. Some of the people of St. Thomas formed a voluntary association called the Tax and Rate Payers Association. One of their leaders, Darrell Reid, noted that what Black people needed

was an Armageddon and second coming of Christ.⁴⁵ In retrospect, we know that Howell's and other founding Rastafari evangelists' message of Black redemption resonated with many of them. So, let us close now with the Rastafari.

Ethiopianist Themes of Rastafari

What were the early Rastafari preaching and teaching? In the influential and controversial "Report on the Rastafari," the authors declared that the "creed" of the Rastafari was that

the black race are the true Israelites . . . descended from King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba[,] . . . God is Black (Jeremiah 8), Haile Selassie is black, Solomon and Sheba were black, and so are the true Israelites. The white men have worshiped a dead God, and have taught black men to do likewise.⁴⁶

The early Rastafari embodied the core themes of Ethiopianism that can be traced back to Prince Hall, George Liele, and others. Their dominant orientation was that of romantic racialism rather than secular pan Africanism. It shined through in their discourse in their promotion of the ideas that King Ras Tafari is the Black Messiah, that Black people will be redeemed, that the Rastafari are God's chosen people, and that whites will be punished for their wickedness as well as in their renunciation of allegiance to colonial governments and their call to repatriate the promised land, Africa.

That the Rastafari people could hold divine an Ethiopian monarch—a Black Christ and Black God—is unsurprising once viewed in the context of a venerable body of cultural beliefs and practices that evolved over the course of nearly two hundred years. Initially, Howell and others claimed that Ras Tafari was Christ returned in kingly character. A parallel view emerged soon thereafter, that King Ras Tafari was God incarnate. The views are not incompatible. Both perspectives persist to the present, attesting the durability of Ethiopianist ideas and the persistence and legacies of white supremacy.

While the early Rastafari evangelists translated Ethiopianism into a novel and coherent ideology, many of the early Rastafari themselves were attracted to the ideas because they were interested in information about

God, race, justice, and “truth.”⁴⁷ For them, the truth was the “half that never was told,” how Europeans erased Ethiopians from the Bible and from history. Ethiopianism and Rastafari were a means to revealing and revising that half.

Conclusion

Gayraud Wilmore has pointed out that “whenever the Judeo-Christian tradition is made known to an oppressed people, the scenario of election, captivity, and liberation in the Old Testament seems to have special appeal. The story of the deliverance of Israel from slavery has always been understood as the prototype of nationalist redemption.”⁴⁸ Of course we know that beliefs such as a Black Messiah and/or a Black Christ are culturally produced, historically contingent, and ever shifting. There is value in reconstructing how things are culturally produced, especially if we are interested the persistence, utility, and appeal of beliefs and practices such as Ethiopianism and the Rastafari of Jamaica.

Notes

1. By *Black* I mean continental Africans and their descendants, which I use synonymously with African-descended people.
2. “Howell Given 2-Year Term for Sedition,” *Daily Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica), March 16, 1934, 16, emphasis in original.
3. Edward Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).
4. Michael Walzer, *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 17.
5. *Ibid.*
6. In Revelations 5:2–5 (KJB), John writes: “I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof? . . . [N]o man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon. And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.”
7. Luke 21:28 (KJB).
8. Hélène Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2003).
9. “Bedward Tried Yesterday and Sent to Lunatic Asylum,” *Daily Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica), May 5, 1921, 6; Clinton Hutton and Nathaniel Murrell, “Rastas’ Psychology of Blackness, Resistance, and Somebodiness,” in *Chanting Down Babylon*:

- The Rastafari Reader*, ed. Nathaniel Murrell et al. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 45.
10. Ras Sekou Sankara Tafari, introduction to *Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions in the Early Rastafari Religion*, by Robert Hill (Chicago: Research Associate School Times Publications/Frontline Distribution, 2000), 3–10; Michael G. Smith, Roy Augier, and Rex M. Nettleford, *The Rastafari in Kingston, Jamaica* (Mona, Jamaica: Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of the West Indies, 1960), 6.
 11. George Shepperson, “Ethiopianism: Past and Present,” in *Christianity in Tropical Africa: Studies Presented and Discussed at the Seventh International Seminar, University of Ghana, April 1965*, ed. C. G. Baeta (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 249–64.
 12. William Scott, “‘And Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Its Hands’: The Origins of Ethiopianism in Afro-American Thought, 1767–1896,” *Umoja* 2, no. 1 (1978): 1–13.
 13. Charles Price, “‘Cleave to the Black’: Expressions of Ethiopianism in Jamaica,” *New West Indian Guide* 77, nos. 1–2 (2003): 31–64.
 14. Wilson Moses, “The Poetics of Ethiopianism: W. E. B. Du Bois and Literary Black Nationalism,” *American Literature* 47, no. 3 (1975): 412.
 15. Charles Price, “‘History-in-Person’: The Cultural Production of Populism among Kentucky Small-Scale Family Farmers,” *Social Identities* 19, no. 2 (2013): 158–72.
 16. Moses, “Poetics of Ethiopianism,” 411–26.
 17. Joanna Brooks, “Prince Hall, Freemasonry, and Genealogy,” *African American Review* 34, no. 2 (2000): 197–216.
 18. *Ibid.*, 202.
 19. John Marrant, *A Sermon Preached on the 24th Day of June 1789, Being the Festival of Saint John the Baptists, at the Request of the Right Worshipful the Grand Master Prince Hall, and the Rest of the Brethren of the African Lodge of the Honorable Society of Free and Accepted Masons in Boston* (Boston: T. and J. Fleet at the Bible and Heart, 1789).
 20. The sources on Liele that I am familiar with credit him with founding the first Black congregation and church in Silver Bluff. However, David Shannon Sr., Julia F. White, and Deborah van Broekhaven suggest that Waite Palmer (a white man) and David George (an enslaved man) were the cofounders of both organizations, although they maintain that Liele was the first Black man to preach to the congregations (introduction to *George Liele’s Life and Legacy: An Unsung Hero*, ed. David Shannon Sr., Julia F. White, and Deborah van Broekhaven [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2012], 19). Given the competing accounts of who did what first, for now I stick with the account I presented in *Becoming Rasta*: Liele is recognized as having organized the first Black congregation and church in what became the United States of America (*Becoming Rasta: The Social and Personal Origins of the Rastafari of Jamaica* [New York: New York University Press, 2009], 33).
 21. Horace Russell, prologue to *George Liele’s Life and Legacy*, 6–12.
 22. David Shannon Sr. and Averett Shannon, “George Liele: Apostle of Liberation and Faith,” in *George Liele’s Life and Legacy*, 71–83.

23. *Ibid.*, 71.
24. Noel Erskine, "George Liele, Native Baptists, and the Revival Church," in *George Liele's Life and Legacy*, 129–39.
25. David Walker, "An Appeal in Four Articles," in *Classical Black Nationalism: From the American Revolution to Marcus Garvey*, ed. Wilson J. Moses (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 68–89.
26. Whites are defined as people of continental Europe and their descendants (for heuristic purposes, I sidestep the identity of the offspring of European and African intercourse).
27. Robert Young, "The Ethiopian Manifesto," in *Classical Black Nationalism*, 65.
28. George Fredrickson, *Black Liberation: A Comparative History of Black Ideologies in the United States and South Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 69–72.
29. Wilson Moses, introduction to *Classical Black Nationalism*, 20–21.
30. Edwin Redkey, *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner* (New York: Arno, 1971), 176.
31. Gad Heuman, *The Killing Time: The Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).
32. Price, "Cleave to the Black."
33. Daniel Thwaite, *The Seething African Pot: A Study of Black Nationalism, 1882–1935* (London: Constable, 1936), 37.
34. *Ibid.*, 38.
35. Webb, *A Black Man*, 12.
36. Robert A. Rogers, *The Holy Piby: The Blackman's Bible* (Chicago: Research Associates, School Times Publications, 2000).
37. "The African Church," *Daily Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica), December 24, 1925, 17.
38. "A New Religion," *Daily Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica), June 26, 1927, 2.
39. Fitz B. Pettersburgh, *The Royal Parchment Scroll of Black Supremacy* (Chicago: Frontline Books, 2003).
40. *Ibid.*, 5.
41. "A New Religion," 2.
42. Jacob Dorman, *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).
43. Hill, *Dread History*, 25–27.
44. "Healer," *Daily Gleaner* (Kingston, Jamaica), September 20, 1930, 5.
45. Ken Post, *Arise Ye Starvelings: The Jamaican Labour Rebellion of 1938 and Its Aftermath* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978).
46. Smith et al., *The Rastafari in Kingston*, 18–19.
47. Price, *Becoming Rasta*, 9.
48. Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 60.