

The Best Books in Rastafari Studies

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ESTABLISHED AROUND NINETY YEARS ago, the Rastafari religious movement is a bright spot on the world's cultural map—*sistren* and *bredren* are now everywhere, their dreadlocks flashing as they wield the Bible as a decolonial weapon. Reggae music explains such globalization. Since the late 1960s, artists like Bob Marley and Queen Ifrica have been using the power of word and sound to promote Rastafari's message of black somebodiness—an anticolonial theo-psychology that sponsors a retrieval of self and cultural agency denied by late modern capitalism, which is known as "Babylon" in the language of the Rastafari. Several studies have addressed the varieties of Rastafari religious experience. In the process, they take up issues and proposals that not only excite conversation, but continue to shape the movement as it advances around the world and into the new millennium.

Hélène Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism*. Chicago Review Press, 320pp.

After the November 2, 1930 coronation of His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, the last Emperor of Ethiopia, whom Rastas see as "Jah," or God-in-the-flesh, the awareness of a new era in Black history grew as far away as Jamaica. Some Kingston-based followers of the black nationalist and Pan-Africanist activist Marcus Garvey, like Leonard Howell, became animated by Selassie's royal title, "the Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah," an allusion to the Book of Revelation in the Bible. Howell became the "first Rasta," according to Hélène Lee, and her biography describes his many accomplishments. "Pinnacle" is one such success. Located in the St. Jago Hills high above Spanish Town, Jamaica's old capital, Pinnacle is the first Rastafari commune, which Howell founded in the 1940s. Police raids eventually crushed

Pinnacle, and the Rastafari who fled soon resettled in the slums of western Kingston, in places like Trench Town. Lee's moving as well as adroit account of this story ends by emphasizing the words on Howell's epitaph ("No man is indispensable but some are irreplaceable"), which remind readers that Howell nurtured a now-notable religious group in its infancy, and that Pinnacle was Rasta's first vision of the promised land.

Barbara Makeda Blake Hannah, *Rastafari—The New Creation, Gold Medal Edition*. Jamaican Media Productions Ltd., 136pp.

Rastas in Howell's day were vilified, often seen as a social menace, but they eventually came in from the cold, as prominent individuals articulated the Rastafari message, or "Rastology," in persuasive, compelling ways. A fêted filmmaker, journalist, and Independent Opposition Senator in the Jamaican Parliament (1984-87), Hannah is the author of many books, including this touchstone text, the first insider's account of a transnational religious movement centered around His Imperial Majesty's divinity. This judicious and perceptive book, a contemporary classic, dismantles media stereotypes and misappropriations in pop culture, situating what she dubs the "true essence" of Rastafari *livity* (practices and beliefs) in the broad, often unheralded context of Black history and heritage. Among the numerous topics discussed are Garvey's impact on Rastology; the economic as well as spiritual value of marijuana or "ganja"; the challenges and questions women pose to a patriarchal spirituality; the issue of reparations as well as repatriation; and, the growing trend of white Rastafari. Hannah has been a Rastawoman for decades, is considered an Elder Empress of the faith, and just recently the Jamaican government invested

her with the Order of Distinction in the Rank of Officer. While other, heavily footnoted tomes followed the 1980 first edition of this book, few can rival Hannah's incisive observations and swift-paced prose.

Dean MacNeil, *The Bible and Bob Marley: Half the Story Has Never Been Told*. Cascade Books, 166pp.

Hannah's book is a detail-laden account of the Rastafari faith as an experiential philosophy with deep roots in scripture, specifically those passages that uphold His Imperial Majesty's divinity. And so I appreciate Dean MacNeil's own study, the first monograph to describe the biblical basis for the music of Robert Nesta Marley (aka: "Tuff Gong"), whose roots reggae situated the Rastafari movement, "Jah people," on life's cultural map. If it is true that all Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato, then all reggae is a footnote to Marley, which is why I often urge my biblically-literate students to listen to him. When such undergraduates analyze Marley's lyrics, they often come to see Tuff Gong as an Amos-like prophet, concerned to criticize capitalism, or Babylon, as well as to promote environmental and social justice. They are only half-right. "That Marley can be appreciated not only as a great artist and songwriter but also as an interpreter of scripture is an integral part of the Bob Marley story that has not been sufficiently addressed," MacNeil announces. Reading MacNeil sets the record straight. After spending four chapters carefully scrutinizing over eighty songs and identifying 137 biblical references, MacNeil emerges from his meticulous work to reveal that the Wisdom Literature forms the principal part of Marley's musical canon. "18 percent of Marley's biblical quotations are from Proverbs and 26 percent are from Psalms, which is more than two or three times greater than any other book,"



Nana Yaw Ananse, *Marley Mural*, 2020. Bob Marley Museum, Kingston, Jamaica. Photo courtesy Darren J. N. Middleton.

MacNeil reveals. Together with the Wisdom Literature, the Gospels and Pauline literature also inspired Marley to preach resistance and redemption, which are “constant themes, as ingrained in his music as the Bible and the guitar.” Marley’s music put Babylon, the world even, on notice. And MacNeil’s clear-eyed, clever book shows readers how and why. *The Bible and Bob Marley* summarizes the singular vision and scripture-flecked legend of Rastafari’s global ambassador. Because of Marley’s life and art, reggae’s sprightly signatures now soundtrack the diverse, wide-ranging *livities* of individuals ready to reclaim a sense of black somebodiness and cultural agency once denied by Babylon.

Ennis B. Edmonds, *Rastafari: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 144pp.

This accessible account of the Rastafari religious movement begins with its Jamaican origins and then comes forward in time, showing why and how the Rastas have transitioned from their initial status as cultural outcasts to their current position as ideological influencers. “Rastafari and reggae have provided Anglophone Caribbean writers with a distinctive voice that has liberated them from mimicking the aesthetics of British literature,” Edmonds holds. “Bob Marley is certainly right. The rejected and maligned Rastafari has become the cornerstone of Caribbean cultural production, whether in music, art, or literature.”

Besides being readable, this book displays admirable nuance. An instructive chapter on the Rastafari's social formation reveals that there are many mansions, or denomination-like groups, within the movement, each one marked by pronounced principles and practices. There are many Rastologies—the inexorable result of the movement's acephalous character. Whereas members of the Twelve Tribes of Israel mansion tend to engage the world around them, for example, other groups, like the Nyabinghi, favor strict isolationism. Whatever else it accomplishes, then, Edmonds's edifying work gives proof to the lie that all Rastas think and act alike. Similarly dextrous discussions of three timely trends—internationalization, gender relations, and commodification—conclude this concisely written and attractively priced text.

Monique A. Bedasse, *Jah Kingdom: Rastafarians, Tanzania, and Pan-Africanism in the Age of Decolonization*. University of North Carolina Press, 270pp.

The Rastafari religious movement has spread from the Caribbean to many parts of the world since the 1930s and this is due, at least in part, to the Rastafari's long-held hope for repatriation to Africa as well as Jamaican popular culture's transnational appeal. From Senegalese Muslim Rasta making pilgrimage to the Mouride holy city of Touba to Rasta-identifying Maori nationalists in Aotearoa, New Zealand, and from Israeli Dreads fostering philo-Zionism in Tel Aviv to Kyoto-based Zen Rastas looking to reclaim the Japanese environment, Rastas are everywhere. Today's *bredren* and *sistren* are becoming less homogenous, however, and local *livities* as well as global diversity are now an integral part of the way Rastas are evolving. Recent studies confirm this observation. And by emphasizing the Rastafari's impact as well as existence in far-flung parts of the world, scholars are now underlining the idea that Rasta may best be

understood as an artful, vernacular religion in commonplace life. Bedasse is one such scholar. An associate professor of history and of African and African-American studies at Washington University in St. Louis, she has authored an award-winning book that ranges across three continents and five countries to reveal how today's Rastas are rising to the challenge of re-imagining their faith to fit their ever-changing world(s). Here, Rastafari repatriation to Tanzania is the lens through which Bedasse investigates complex issues of race, gender, and social class; religion's nature and function; tense alliances between indigenous Tanzanian Rastafari and diasporic Rastafari repatriates; and, the ostensibly uneasy alliance between socialism and economic development in decolonial times. "The Rastafarian movement has made its mark around the world as a cultural phenomenon," Bedasse acknowledges. "Yet the focus on its cultural representations has neglected the history of Rastafari's evolution as an expression of black radicalism, and has relegated its militancy to a bygone era when its association with popular culture could not have been foreseen."

Jah Kingdom complements other, recent accounts of Rastafari repatriation to Africa, such as those authored by Giulia Bonacci and Erin C. MacLeod, yet it moves beyond their sterling efforts, revealing an emerging site of Rastafari identity—Tanzania—and shows readers how Rastas in this East African country are using black radical politics to repair the ancestral links broken by colonialism, the slave trade, and certain forms of neo-colonialism. Bedasse's virtuoso study, which makes detailed use of numerous and valuable primary sources, "insists on a history driven less by outsiders and more by the men and women for whom Rastafari remained an enduring and ever-evolving project," and therefore I think it ranks as the most instructive model for the future of Rastafari Studies. **A**