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BUILDING BEYOND BABYLON

An honors paper submitted to the Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religion
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Holden Balthazar Ackerman

May 2016

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05/17/16

Building Beyond Babylon
The Progression of Rastafari as it Follows Early Christianity

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The development of Christianity in its first few hundred years of existence serves as a paradigm for the development of Rastafari, which is approaching its one hundredth year of existence. The Rastafari faith is moving towards greater institutionalization and more formal doctrine in order to prolong its existence and increase its following in the same way that Christianity did. The early stages of Rastafari are similar to those of Christianity given both faiths moved to becoming more institutionalized and developed more formalized doctrine in order to keep the faith alive into future generations. They both emerged from an outlier class that has been oppressed by a ruling class. Both came from Judaic traditions and carried with them concepts of monotheism, ritualistic practices, and an adherence towards the foundational texts. Both faiths follow a Messianic figure whom the followers believe is the Messiah foreshadowed in Judaic scriptures that will lead their followers to the Kingdom of God. And in both cases, the faiths survived after the deaths of their messiahs.

Both communities were apocalyptic and looked forward to entering the Kingdom of God. Early Christians believed that Christ was the Messiah and that he had died and resurrected. Upon his resurrection, the end of the world and entrance into the Kingdom of God was imminent. Rastas believe that Haile Selassie I was the Messiah and that he would deliver them to the Kingdom of God. Both faiths faced turning points when the eschaton did not emerge. The early Christian communities realized that the end of the world was not as imminent as they had thought. Rastas dealt with Selassie's death, which led them to reevaluate how the Kingdom of God would be entered. Due to a combination of these turning points and time having passed, the faiths had to become more formal and organized in order to survive.

Christianity eventually moved to becoming more organized with church bodies, hierarchical structures, and written doctrine. Like Christianity, the figures who founded Rastafari

and led the first believing communities have died out, which inspires new figures to take their places, doctrine to be written down, and organized religious bodies to grow stronger. If the development of Rastafari continues to resemble that of Christianity, its doctrine will be written down more and the sects will begin to more closely resemble the churches of Christianity. Some scholars of Rastafari, such as William David Spencer and Leonard E. Barrett Sr., predict that the future of Rastafari will involve sects and followers merging with Christian churches. Spencer argues in *Dread Jesus* that the sects of Rastafari are beginning to resemble churches more and more, which will eventually lead to Rastas becoming part of the church.¹ Barrett argues in *The Rastafarians* that the movement will continue to grow and eventually become part of the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church.² Rastafari has come to institutionalize itself more, but that does not mean it will become part of existing church institutions. It is moving in its own direction, establishing itself as a unique branch of Abrahamic religion.

Neither faith was centralized in the earliest points of their development. Early followers of Christ made up small communities scattered among different cities. After Christ's death, disciples believed that the eschaton was imminent and the Kingdom of God at hand. Followers of Christ had an apocalyptic mindset that inspired them to proselytize the message of Christ. The goal of early followers was to get as many people to believe that Jesus was the Son of God and that belief in his resurrection would allow one to enter the Kingdom of God. Early church leaders like Paul of Tarsus traveled from city to city to establish believing communities that would repent their sins and await the end of the world.

¹ William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 1999), 208-209.

² Leonard E. Barrett Sr., *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 193-194.

Early followers of Christ faced problems when the end of the world did not come. In First Thessalonians, Paul responds to a letter he received from a believing community he founded in which members had died before the end of the world came. Paul responded “we believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.”³ Because someone in the community died, questions were raised among the followers of Christ. They were only able to ask their church’s founder for advice as long as he was around; so after Paul’s death, they were without consultation. This turning point in the development of Christianity was significant in that it forced communities that followed Christ to do one of two things: merge back into the communities to which they previously belonged, or redefine their group’s belief system to accommodate the changing times.

Many early Christian groups, especially those that emerged from Jewish traditions, went back to their old communities out of the belief that Jesus Christ was not the messiah or the Kingdom of God was not as imminent as they thought.⁴ Other early Christian communities, often those made of gentiles, evolved their belief systems to accommodate the changes going on in the world. Paul’s community in Thessalonica had to adapt after his death. In Second Thessalonians, Paul addresses concerns among the community that the Kingdom of God had already come and they had missed it.⁵ Paul assures them that the Day of the Lord had not yet come and when it does, the people will know.⁶ These communities were repeatedly asking questions and sharing concerns with Paul about the coming of the end of the world, but only for as long as Paul was

³ 1 Thess. 4:14.

⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 324.

⁵ 2 Thess. 2:2.

⁶ Ibid. 2:3.

around could he share his knowledge.³ After his death, communities needed to resort to different outside leaders or self-governing church bodies.

Paul's letters serve as documents for the evolution of the early church. Later documents, such as Paul's letters to Timothy, address problems that concerned the church in its later period. First Timothy is dated at approximately 100 CE.⁸ At this point, Paul is deceased but his name is still being used as a pseudonym for the legitimization of formal theological letters. First Timothy was written to Timothy, a church leader in Ephesus, and one of its central concerns is the qualifications of bishops. In First Timothy, the author writes that bishops must be male, learned, married and older. In earlier letters of Paul, there were no bishops or formalized leaders. Paul referred to himself as a deacon⁴ and called other church leaders this as well. In the end of Romans, Paul acknowledges other deacons who have helped spread the message of Jesus, several of whom, such as Phoebe, are female.¹⁰

Romans and First Timothy were written decades apart⁵ and though both are addressed to Christian communities, the communities have very different leadership structures. As time passed, the community went from informal deacons to formalized bishops. In its early stages, the community was awaiting the eschaton and needed only a few figures, such as Paul and other deacons, to guide them into the Kingdom of God. But as time passed, the eschaton did not come

³ *Harper Collins Study Bible*. San Francisco: HarperOne, 1989. 2011. Second Thessalonians is a disputed letter, one in which Paul's authorship is called to question. It was written after First Thessalonians and to the same church.

⁸ Ibid. 2015. 1 Timothy is dated at about 120 CE and due to this date, no scholars believe this was written by Paul himself. It still serves as a document for the progression of Christianity.

⁴ Col. 1:25. This is another disputed letter so it may not have been Paul who referred to himself as a deacon. ¹⁰ Rom. 16:1.

⁵ *Harper Collins Study Bible*. 1909. Romans is an undisputed letter, one in which Paul's penmanship is not called to question.

and the communities began dealing with other concerns for which they needed to call upon deacons for guidance. But eventually, the deacons who helped found the communities died so they needed new leadership structures. In Ephesus at 100 CE, the Christian community organized a hierarchal clerical body that is governed exclusively by educated, married men. Deacons such as Paul, who was celibate,¹² and Phoebe, who was female, would not have met the qualifications to become a bishop at the time First Timothy was written.

Even when Paul was alive, the communities did not agree on every theological and doctrinal detail. This was due to Paul not having been the only church leader in his period. He makes reference to other deacons such as Phoebe in Romans. In Galatians, he makes reference to Peter, apostle of Jesus. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he acknowledges false prophets who have been influencing the community in Galatia. These false prophets are encouraging the people in Galatia to revert back to Jewish Law. Paul espouses that the Law is dead¹³ given the end of the world is imminent. Paul encourages followers of Christ to abandon practicing Mosaic Law and turn focus to the repenting of sins and faith in Jesus as the resurrected Son of God. Part of Paul's abandonment of Jewish Law was due to him having converted gentile communities to which the Law was irrelevant before his arrival. In Galatians, Paul is angry that other prophets are encouraging believers to do things like practice circumcision and follow dietary laws.¹⁴

Paul's letter to the Galatians shows how un-unified the early Christian communities were, even in Paul's lifetime, and how different Paul's contemporary church leaders were from himself. Paul tells a story of eating a community dinner with Peter, apostle of Jesus, and the feud between the two of them that followed it. Paul eludes to a dinner in Antioch that was not prepared with adherence to Jewish dietary laws. Peter and Paul disagreed as to whether or not it should be eaten. It was Paul who claimed that the Law is no longer relevant, and he scorned

¹² 1 Cor. 7:7.

¹³ Rom. 7:6. Paul did not found every early Christian community, such as the one in Rome. ¹⁴ Gal. 5:6.

Peter whom he claimed used to eat with the gentiles “before certain men came from James.”⁶

This ideological difference prompted a feud between them that may never have been resolved.

Paul did not feel as if the Law was needed anymore because of the imminent eschaton, but as time passed and problems arose in the communities that he helped found, people needed guidance. This is perhaps the main reason for way Paul wrote letters in the first place, to keep people on the straight and narrow until the end of the world arrives. Regardless, after Paul died, the communities he founded had to revert to older law systems or adapt to newer ones.

The letters of Paul document a shift from smaller, apocalyptic believing communities to larger, more structured hierarchies. The small, apocalyptic communities could not stay that way forever. The early leaders who founded the communities could not be around forever either. The communities had to evolve and adapt to the changing times and the geological place to which they belonged. In the case of Ephesus, this meant making a more organized, patriarchal governing body. To other communities, it meant going back to the belief systems of the communities to which they formally belonged.

The first stages of Rastafari were similar to the early stages of Christianity. Rastafari was founded in 1935 by Leonard Howell, an Anglican preacher and student in Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, an organization whose intention was to unify and uplift people of African ancestry in the New World. Garvey wrote “Look to Africa where a black

⁶ Ibid. 2:11-14.

king shall be crowned, he shall be your redeemer.”⁷ In his book, *The Promised Key*, Howell claims that Haile Selassie I, who was the emperor of Ethiopia at the time, is the redeemer of whom Garvey spoke.⁸ Howell went to his native Jamaica to proselytize this belief. He went to the countryside and founded a village called Pinnacle, the first Rasta community.

Howell continued to preach and spread the word of Rastafari outside of Pinnacle. It continued to grow throughout the 1940s and 1950s, eventually spreading to Kingston, Jamaica’s capital.⁹ Rasta communities varied in size, some in small villages and others in large neighborhoods.¹⁰ For the first few decades, the communities were scattered but relatively contained in the island of Jamaica and stayed unified under Howell’s leadership. A significant part of why the Rastas stayed unified was their apocalyptic belief system. Rastas of Howell’s time did not await the end of the world and entrance into the Kingdom of God in the same way the early Christians did. They were instead awaiting the emergence of a new era of black power and Afrocentric government ushered in by Haile Selassie I.

Selassie was emperor of Ethiopia, an African nation that had remained sovereign without colonization and predominantly Christian due to the presence of the Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Howell viewed Ethiopia as the ideal African state, the last bastion of African heritage and pride. He saw Selassie as the ideal black monarch, the redeemer of black people separated from African, and incarnation of God. In *The Promised Key*, he calls Selassie “King of Kings

⁷ Robert A. Hill, *Dread History: Leonard P. Howell and Millenarian Visions in the Early Rastafarian Religion* (Chicago: Frontline Distribution Int’l Inc., 2001), 13.

⁸ Leonard Percival Howell and Ras E.S.P. McPherson, *The Promised Key: The Original Literary Roots of Rastafari* (Brooklyn, NY: A&B Publishers Group, 2001), 7.

⁹ Like with the spreading of Christianity to Rome, Rastafari made its way to a cosmopolitan area.

¹⁰ Leonard Percival Howell and Ras E.S.P. McPherson, *The Promised Key: The Original Literary Roots of Rastafari* (Brooklyn, NY: A&B Publishers Group, 2001), xxi.

and Lord of Lords, The Conquering Lion of Judah, The Elect of God and the Light of the world.”¹¹ Howell modelled the Rasta way of life off of faith in Selassie as the Messiah.

Faith in Selassie as the incarnation of God is a key tenet to Howell’s Rastafari, but faith alone was not enough to usher in the new era of black pride and Afrocentrism. Howell taught his followers many ritualistic practices so they may demonstrate livity, a Rasta term meaning life force or the ability to live life with cleanliness and purity. This is done by adhering to the rules and rituals of Rastafari. Rastas only eat foods that fall under Ital, which is a dietary code practiced by Rastas similar to Jewish dietary laws. Rastas reject customs that Howell deemed were forced upon them by colonial influences. Rastas smoke cannabis as a spiritual practice.¹² The following rules and rituals in addition to faith in Selassie as the Messiah is what makes one a Rasta according to Howell, but he was not the only Rasta leader who had opinions and perspectives on what the best way to practice was.

Howell lived until 1981,¹³ and from the founding of Pinnacle to his death, Rastafari grew and spread to different places. A result of this was other leaders emerged with different ideologies on what to believe and how to practice rituals. In 1958, one of Howell’s students by the name of Emanuel Charles Edwards broke away and founded his own sect of Rastafari called the Bobo Ashanti, which offered a more conservative interpretation of Rastafari that he believed would increase the livity of the community. Edwards had different doctrinal beliefs, like a divine trinity of which Edwards is part, and stricter ritual practices, like dress codes and more limited dietary laws some of which harken back to Mosaic Law.¹⁴ In 1968, another sect emerged called

¹¹ Ibid. 7.

¹² Leonard E. Barrett Sr., *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 246.

¹³ Leonard Percival Howell and Ras E.S.P. McPherson, *The Promised Key: The Original Literary Roots of Rastafari* (Brooklyn, NY: A&B Publishers Group, 2001), xxxiii.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer and Adrian Anthony MacFarlane, *Chanting Down Babylon:*

the Twelve Tribes of Israel, founded by a Rasta named Vernon Carrington who wanted to offer a more liberal interpretation of Rastafari and get a more universal appeal. Carrington wanted Rastafari to become spread beyond the borders of geography and race, so he preached love for all races and people to make it more accessible to more people.¹⁵ Even in Howell's lifetime, the movement grew and splintered off as different Rastas offered their own interpretations.

Neither faith was centralized in the early stages of its development. Howell is credited with having founded the first Rasta community; but even in his time, other religious leaders were preaching the same message with their own interpretations. In this regard, he is similar to Paul who also preached his own beliefs among contemporaries who preached different messages. In both cases. The two justified themselves among other leaders of the faith by telling their followers to believe and practice in particular ways that would protect them in the end of the world. Both men awaited a day of judgement, and while the circumstances they awaited were different, many things were the same. Both men wanted to lead their communities into a new world, a better one in which their faith and practices would be rewarded. Neither Paul nor Howell founded organized churches because the Day of Lord was coming soon and hierarchical, doctrinal-driven church body would have been too difficult to form. All that mattered was that the people believed in the Messiah of whom they preached.

Both Christianity and Rastafari are postcolonial religions, faiths that emerged in communities that had been occupied by outside forces. Christianity emerged in Judea, which was occupied by Rome at the time, and Rastafari emerged in Jamaica, which was a colony of the

The Rastafari Reader (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 139.

¹⁵ Ibid. 82-84.

United Kingdom. The presence of oppressive political and social influences inspired the creation of new belief systems, belief systems that speak to the needs of the oppressed peoples and foreshadow the coming of a better future for them, often coinciding with the fall of the oppressors.

Rome occupied Judea from 6-135 CE. Roman influence was present in the land throughout Jesus Christ's lifetime and the first few decades of Christianity. At this point in time, the Judean people were monotheists, followers of one god. Roman influence sparked feuds among four political and religious movements: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and Zealots. The Sadducees emerged during the Second Temple Period, 150 BCE to 70 CE. They had a conservative outlook, accepting only the Law of Moses and supporting Hellenization (spread of Greek influence). The Pharisees go back as far as the exile in the 7th Century BCE, but came into prominence with the presence of Rome as they were strong supporters of the Law and resisters of Hellenization. The Essenes advocated asceticism, voluntary poverty, and often celibacy and were more inclusive in their acceptance of older and newer writings. They were apocalyptic and did not resist Roman occupation given the end of the world was at hand. The Zealots were focused on removing Roman occupation by guerilla force and restoring sovereign rule.¹⁶

An outside empire controlling the government divided the people of Judea politically and religiously. There were the Sadducees and Pharisees who disagreed on the issue of Hellenization, the spread of Greek influence that had been in Judea since Alexander the Great and had been spreading more with Roman occupation. This shows that some Judeans were worried that Jewish culture was being threatened and outside cultural influence needed to be lessened. The different

¹⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 59-66.

sects show that Judea was divided among people who either wanted to work with Rome to govern Judea in a way that protects the interests of Jewish people, or who wanted Rome gone from Judea completely. The Zealots fell under the latter category, and they were prepared to rid Roman influence through with the aid of violence. This contrasted the ideals of the Essenes, who were both pacifist and apocalyptic, wanting a peaceful future without Judea or Rome.

Christianity emerged at a time when Judea was divided. The gospels of the New Testament were all written 40-100 years after the death of Jesus Christ, a span of time during which these different schools of thought were active in Judea. Each gospels tell the story of the life of Jesus that caters to a specific audience. Each gospel was written at a point in time, some building off of others.¹⁷ The Jesus portrayed in the canonic gospels is one who dismisses the dominant sects at the time in favor of a new school of thought.

In the Gospel of Mark, the earliest written, Jesus is portrayed as being dismissive of all these schools of thought.¹⁸ In Mark, Jesus first confronts the Pharisees. Jesus is approached by Pharisees who ask him if it is right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar. Jesus responds, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”¹⁸ This question was mentioned in Mark because it was written at a time when many Judeans were angry with Roman occupation and wanted to be disobedient towards Roman law. Jesus’ answer implies that the writer of Mark along with the community to which it was catering did not want any more violence or trouble

¹⁷ Ibid. 106-111. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are synoptic gospels because they have many stories in common that can be placed side-by-side and be compared. This has lead scholars to theorize that Mark, the earliest gospel dated at 40 CE, was used as a source by the writers of Matthew and Luke which are both dated at 70 CE. The Synoptic Problem is a theory that explores the similarities and differences in these gospels. Both Matthew and Luke borrowed heavily from Mark, but also changed some details to befit their time period and intended audience.

¹⁸ Ibid. 61.

¹⁸ Mk. 12:17.

with Rome and Judea and wanted to move towards a new future. Christianity was beginning to emerge as not Roman and not Jewish. It was establishing itself as a new faith.¹⁹

Jesus in Mark also criticized the Sadducees for their strict adherence to Mosaic Law and their lack of belief in the resurrection of the dead. Sadducees bring up that according to Moses, if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. They ask a hypothetical question in which a husband were to die and the wife continually marry the husband's brothers. But eventually, all the brothers die after marriage and the wife dies last. They asked Jesus whose wife the woman would be after resurrection. Jesus answers by saying the risen dead will neither marry nor be married, but will instead be like angels. Jesus criticizes the Sadducees, telling them that they would know the answer had they been more familiar with the Book of Moses.²⁰ Mark shows that Jesus is moving towards a future in which those who only follow Jewish Law and do not welcome newer aspects of Christianity will be vindicated.

Jesus in Mark provides a critique of the Zealots as well, but does so in a less overt way. When Mark lists Jesus' twelve disciples, it reads that one of them, Simon, is a Zealot.²¹ The Zealots were prevalent at the time Mark was written, and many Jews viewed them as them violent revolutionaries. Despite having a Zealot follower, Jesus is nonviolent. For Mark to include one as a disciple of Christ, he is appealing to the Zealots reading Mark at the time. Adding diversity to the list of disciples in order to appeal to a greater audience is used in the Gospel of Matthew as well. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus calls upon Matthew, a tax collector,

¹⁹ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 267-268.

²⁰ Mk. 12:18-27.

²¹ Mk. 3:18.

to follow him.²² As a tax collector, Matthew would have been a Jew working in collaboration with the Roman occupation. Such a person would have been antagonized by the Zealots, but the list of twelve disciples in the Gospel of Matthew lists Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot alongside one another.²³ The writer of the Gospel of Matthew expands on Mark by appealing to a broader Jewish audience and showing a message of nonviolence.

The portrayals of Jesus in the canonical gospels subvert the sects that had been feuding in Judea at the time the gospels were written. Jesus does not belong to any one sect; instead, he is moving towards a future in which the problems over which the sects had been quarreling will no longer be necessary. The four sects emerged as postcolonial political movements, schools of thought that exist to combat or negotiate with the outside influences that pervaded the previous society. Christianity emerged as a postcolonial religion in response to these movements in addition to Rome. Early Christianity was also apocalyptic. Preachers like Jesus and John the Baptist came at a time when Judea was occupied by a force so powerful, few thought they armed resistance was feasible. Rome was too great to fight with force, so apocalyptic preachers fought them with prophecy, promising a future when the oppressors would no longer be powerful.²⁴

Belief in the resurrected Jesus Christ as the Son of God was the main tenet early followers of Christ believed would prepare people for the end of the world. Christians were less concerned with reconciling the tensions between Roman influence and Jewish culture. They were more concerned with preparing their followers for the end. The message that Jesus carries in the

²² Mt. 9:9.

²³ Mt 10:3-4.

²⁴ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York City: HarperCollins, 1994), 35-37.

canonical gospels is in a sense, apolitical given he espouses a lack of political action instead of support for a preexisting party.

In the twentieth century, Rastafari emerged as a postcolonial belief system in a more direct and political way than Christianity did at its time. Rastafari emerged in Jamaica, a land which had been colonized since 1509 CE, only getting its independence in 1962.²⁵ During the twentieth century, most of Jamaica's population was made up of people of African ancestry, the descendants of slaves brought over to the New World. Most of the population was poor and there was a social gap between the white, English ruling class and the black, African lower class. In the 1940s, a few years before Jamaica gained its sovereignty, Leonard Howell founded the Rasta movement. It was both a new religion and a belief system that empowered an oppressed people. In addition to being a new religion, Rastafari was very much a black religion. Howell was a student of Marcus Garvey and a member of Garvey's UNIA. He believed in Garvey's vision of making a Pan-African state. Garvey wanted people of African ancestry who were living in the American diaspora to unite, educate themselves, and form strong, self-sufficient communities. He envisioned a future in which these self-sufficient societies would eventually move to Africa and found a new, sovereign nation-state.²⁷ By founding the village, Pinnacle, Howell was working towards Garvey's vision. Howell founded a community that had as many as 3000 inhabitants that was isolated, economically self-sufficient, and at least in theory, independent of the colonial government.

Howell wanted Pinnacle to be a self-governing body that used its own law codes and belief systems. Howell got the community in trouble when he refused to pay taxes to the British

²⁵ Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer and Adrian Anthony MacFarlane, *Chanting Down Babylon:*

crown and encouraged his constituents to do the same. Howell became accused of treason which put Pinnacle in jeopardy. In addition to that, Pinnacle got a reputation for drug use given the Rastas were growing a smoking cannabis.²⁸ In 1954, Pinnacle got raided by the Jamaican

The Rastafari Reader (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 394.

²⁷ Marcus Garvey, *Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey*, (Dover, DE: Dover Publications, 2004), 6162.

²⁸ Helene Lee, *The First Rasta: Leonard Howell and the Rise of Rastafarianism*, trans. Lily Davis (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2003), 166-167.

government, every adult male was arrested, the cannabis crops were burned, and the community was no longer livable. Howell himself became institutionalized on the grounds of insanity.

Despite being put in place to stop Howell and his influence, these events contributed to the growth of the faith. With both Pinnacle and Howell gone, the Rastas had neither a geographic center nor a central leader. Howell's 3000 followers spread all throughout Jamaica and new leaders took Howell's place in the different regions where they settled. The fall of Pinnacle made it so that more Jamaicans got to hear the ideals of Rastafari. The faith appealed to many people in part due to the way it empowered black people. Howell wrote in *The Promised Key*, "Africans are in bondage today because they approach spirituality through religion provided by foreign invaders and conquerors. Due to human imperfection, religion has become corrupt, political, diverse, and a tool for power struggle."²⁶ Howell intended Rastafari to offer a new form of spirituality, one by and for black people.

Both Rastafari and Christianity emerged in answer to many of the concerns felt by subjugated and oppressed peoples. Rastafari was developed in a direct response to colonial

²⁶ Leonard Percival Howell and Ras E.S.P. McPherson, *The Promised Key: The Original Literary Roots of Rastafari* (Brooklyn, NY: A&B Publishers Group, 2001), 19.

influences that had been controlling the state for centuries. Christianity developed in response to the colonizing force and the preexisting schools of thought. The four sects are bodies that developed in direct response to colonial influence and Christianity ended up responding more directly towards them than to the colonial power itself. Rastafari was less nuanced, given the faith catered so heavily towards oppressed black people and its founder was so openly against colonial powers. The postcolonial connection that these religions shows that they appealed to similar demographics. These faiths attracted people on the periphery or bottom of the social hierarchy who were unhappy with the status quo and desired change.

Many postcolonial religions appeal to oppressed people by empowering them. They also predict a fall of the oppressive forces and profess a better future. Vittorio Lanternari writes in *The Religions of the Oppressed* that many postcolonial religions develop based on the belief that it will be a messianic figure who will bring the fall of the oppressive forces and deliver them to the better future.²⁷ Christianity and Rastafari are both centralized in the belief of a messianic figure.

In the letters of Paul, the earliest texts documenting the behavior of the early church, faith in Jesus as the Son of God is central. Paul claims to have not known Jesus in Jesus' lifetime, and in his letters, does not make reference to the life events of Jesus.²⁸²⁹ But to Paul, Jesus' actions that he committed in his lifetime are not the most important part about him. What is most important is that he died and resurrected from the dead for the forgiveness of sins. Paul was

²⁷ Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*. Translated by Lisa Sergio. (New York: Mentor Books, 1963), 248-249.

²⁸ Gal. 1:11-12.

²⁹ Kgs. 19:15.

apocalyptic and taught that the end of the world is coming. Paul's goal in his own ministry was to get as many people as he could to announce faith in Jesus as the resurrected Son of God.

In Hebrew, messiah means "anointed one." In the Hebrew Bible, the word is used to refer to kings⁴¹ and high priests,³⁰ and the people given the title were not exclusively Jewish.³¹ Jesus was exceptional to the people who followed him because he was not just anointed by God, he was the Son of God. He was the fulfillment of the scriptures, the servant of God who would suffer and die and be glorified.⁴⁴ Jesus was preaching in Judea when it was under the influence of both the Roman Empire and the four sects of Jewish schools of thought. Jesus did not appeal to every member of the Jewish community. For instance, the Sadducees and Pharisees would not have taken well to Jesus' messages. Jesus appealed the lowest, most oppressed demographics. He appealed to those most in need of a redeeming messiah.

Jesus was a laborer,³² born into the Jewish peasantry which was the lowest social class in his society. He was poor and uneducated and he appealed to people who were poor like he was. Jesus renounced earthly possessions and encouraged others to do the same,³³ so he would not have been very popular among the wealthier classes. Jesus appealed to those who obeyed Jewish Law as well as those who did not. Jesus' apostles were not members of the ruling class, but rather fishermen and laborers who did not have many possessions.³⁴ In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus eats a meal with tax collectors and sinners. When asked by Pharisees why he did that, Jesus

³⁰ Lev. 4:3.

³¹ Isa. 45:1. Cyrus the Great of Persia is dubbed messiah for his decree to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. ⁴⁴ Isa. 52:13-15.

³² Mk. 3:6.

³³ Mk. 10:29-31.

³⁴ Mk.

responds “I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”³⁵ Jesus welcomed his teachings to everyone regardless of social class or the reputation they had in their society. In John Dominic Crossan’s book, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, he calls Jesus’ message one of radical egalitarianism, “an absolute equality of people that denies the validity of any discrimination between them and negates the necessity of any hierarchy among them.”³⁶ Jesus came to preach equality, and if it would not be reached on earth, it would in heaven.

Rastafari is a messianic faith that declares Haile Selassie I the messiah. Howell argues in *The Promised Key* that Selassie is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, portraying him as the messiah who will deliver all people of African ancestry into a better future. Selassie was the king that Garvey predicted would rise in Africa.³⁷ Though Howell always spoke of Selassie as being blessed by God and having divine qualities, he never calls Selassie God.³⁸

Representing Selassie as the literal personification and incarnation of God was not done by Howell, but rather by students who followed him. The question as to who the first Rasta to declare Selassie God is still being debated. It was most likely not made by one person, but by several people who lived in Pinnacle and took to teaching Rastafari themselves after the community disbanded and Howell was institutionalized. Without the central leadership Howell offered, the teachings moved from Selassie being a messianic figure, to him being God himself. Rastafari emerged from a Judeo-Christian tradition. Jamaica was a British colony and most Jamaicans were followers of the Church of England. Howell and his contemporaries were no

³⁵ Lk. 5:29-32.

³⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York City: HarperCollins, 1994), 79.

³⁷ One reason for why Selassie was so embraced by Rastas is that he is a fulfillment of the king that was foretold in Isaiah.

³⁸ Leonard Percival Howell and Ras E.S.P. McPherson, *The Promised Key: The Original Literary Roots of Rastafari* (Brooklyn, NY: A&B Publishers Group, 2001), 20. In the New Testament, Paul never calls Jesus God either.

exception. They grew up following Jesus as the Son of God. Rastafari, even in its earliest forms, did not completely throw out Christianity. Rastafari was not thought of by Howell as being a new religion put forth to replace all others. He introduced it more as a new, spiritual belief system that would appeal to fellow oppressed Jamaicans. Howell stood against colonialism and fought the British occupation politically, economically, socially and religiously. He thought that African Americans who subscribe only to the thoughts and beliefs of the invaders would remain in spiritual bondage. Only by embracing a new faith, one that is more empowering to blacks, could the oppressed black people advance spiritually and advance in the society. In the modern day, many Rastas dislike using the word religion as a classifier for Rastafari. Many Rastas prefer classifying Rastafari with terms like “spirituality, belief system, way of life,” and “movement.”³⁹

Howell associated the word “religion” with the European religions that had been forced onto the black Americans. Despite this resistance, Howell’s upbringing and education inspired new religion to be an evolved Christian theology. Howell does not mention Jesus much in his writing, and when he does, he refers more to Christianity as a whole. To Howell, the role of Jesus was not of great importance to Rastafari. What mattered was that people believe in Haile Selassie I as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Howell viewed Jesus as the messiah of the New Testament and respected Jesus’ status as the Son of God, but he was no longer the most relevant character in the faith. Howell makes it clear in *The Promised Key* that this new faith is Selassie focused and not Christocentric.

³⁹ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 13-14.

In the early stages of Rastafari, and even still today, Christianity is present and influential. When Howell was living in Pinnacle, most of the people he converted were poor plantation workers. They were also native Jamaicans most if not all of whom were reared Christian like Howell was. To most of these followers, Rastafari was not a new religion subverting or replacing Christianity. Rastafari was more like a newly found spirituality, a more empowering way of life, and a vehicle for more self-sufficient communal living. The Christians who embraced Rastafari did not have a problem with acknowledging Jesus as the old Messiah and embracing Selassie as the new Messiah.

The interpretations of Jesus in Rastafari have never been clear or consistent among all Rastas. Since Howell's preaching, there have been a few consistencies in Rasta Christology. Firstly, Jesus has never been at the center of the faith – Selassie is the central figure. Secondly, Rastas acknowledge Jesus as messiah, at least in terms of “anointed one,” the way the word is used in the Hebrew Bible. Thirdly, Jesus is a prophet. He was an endowed figure preached the word of God. Many Rastas, such as Omar TobiJah and Primus St. Croix, accept that Jesus was the Son of God, but not God himself.⁵³ In William David Spencer's *Dread Jesus*, Spencer quotes a speech given by renowned artist and Rasta, Michael Rose, who claims Jesus and Selassie are

⁵³ Omar TobiJah. *Seventy Years Accomplished: The Second Coming* (Norcross, GA: Divine Child Publications, 2013), 121. TobiJah quotes Rasta scholar, Primus St. Croix, who claims Haile Selassie I is the father of Jesus Christ. the same person. Rose argued that Jesus and Selassie are different physical representations of the same spiritual figure. To Rose, Jesus came as the sacrificial lamb, ready to suffer and die for the sin of mankind, and Selassie came as the conquering lion, ready to take back the Kingdom of Judah and restore glory.⁴⁰ Spencer also brings up a 1985 article by scholars, Ajai and Laxmi Mansingh, exploring the influences Hinduism had on early Rastafari. Mansingh argues that Howell, who studied Hinduism, interpreted Selassie as a manifestation of God rather than a reincarnation of Jesus. Other early leaders of Rastafari, like Joseph Hibbert, were more Biblebased and viewed Selassie more as the Second Coming of Christ of which Revelations foretold.⁴⁴

The question of how Jesus is interpreted within Rastafari changes depending on which Rasta is answering. Even the sects of Rastafari, such as the Nyahbinghi and the Twelve Tribes,

⁴⁰ William David Spencer. *Dread Jesus* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 1999), 33. ⁴⁴ Ibid. 33 34.

have neither unified beliefs nor concrete doctrine on this matter. But despite all these theories as to how Jesus is viewed, Selassie is more important. He is the more recent messiah, the black savior, and the conquering lion put on earth to deliver the oppressed peoples from bondage and vindicate the oppressive powers.

In Christianity and Rastafari, the messianic figures are coming to deliver the believing community to a better future. In Paul's interpretation, Jesus died and resurrected to atone for the Sin of Man. He suffered, died, resurrected and ascended into heaven so that the gates to the Kingdom of God could be opened for all of mankind. In Rastafari, Selassie came to deliver the oppressed from bondage and restore the Kingdom of Judah. According to Rasta theology, Haile Selassie I is the 225th monarch in a lineage traced all the way back to King Solomon and the Kingdom of Judah.⁴¹

When Judah fell to Babylon in 587 BCE, the kingdom laid fragmented and the Judean people scattered. According to Rasta doctrine, a diaspora of Judeans left the fallen Judah for Africa, eventually making their way towards the Kingdom of Ge'ez, modern Ethiopia.⁴⁶ The lineage of kings was in this diaspora, but it was not until the coronation of Selassie that one of these kings took the throne. Under this doctrine, modern Rastas are descendants of the lost tribe of Judah. To Rastas, this story is evidence that Rastas, or black Africans, are the people chosen by God to restore power to the Kingdom on Earth.

This story is significant in Rasta doctrine because it identifies modern Rastas with the

⁴¹ Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, William David Spencer and Adrian Anthony MacFarlane. *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998) 25-27. ⁴⁶ Ibid. 29 30.

Tribe of Judah, who are God's chosen people. This story is also significant for it portrays Babylon as the antagonistic force working against Judah. This belief is very strong among Rastas today. Rastas associate Babylon with every antagonistic force that has worked against them in their history. The Kingdom of Babylon worked against Judah in the Sixth Century BCE just as the colonial powers have worked against African nations and Diasporas in more recent centuries. Because of this, modern Rastas appropriate the term Babylon with any colonial influence that works its way against the ideals of the Rasta community.

Babylon often gets used as a cypher for demonic forces. Babylon is associated with the characteristics of greed, power, and influence put forth to have control over others. Babylon is how the influence of the devil works against the influence of God here on Earth. Accepting Rastafari and resisting the influences of Babylon is the essence of the Rasta way of life. Haile Selassie I came to overthrow Babylon and lead mankind into an era without its influences.⁴²

Postcolonial religions appeal to oppressed people by empowering them. They also predict a fall of the oppressive forces and a better future for believers. Early Christianity taught that all oppressive forces brought upon by mankind would be vindicated when the world ends and the

Kingdom of God opens. Rastafari teaches that the Kingdom of Judah will be restored and Babylon will be toppled, ushering in a new world on Earth free from oppression. In both religions, a messianic figure comes to deliver the current, corrupted world to a newer, better one. The messianic figures of Jesus Christ and Haile Selassie I are people with which the believing

⁴² Ibid. 43 45.

communities can identify. They are figures who address the problems of the oppressed communities so that they can work towards a better future.

The messages that messianic figures carry are clearer when they are alive. When Jesus was still alive, his followers could look to him for guidance as they awaited the fall of Rome and

entrance to the Kingdom of God. When Haile Selassie was still alive, Rastas could worship in optimism for the uplift of black power and the fall of Babylon. These messages are less clear when the messianic figure is dead. Christianity faced a turning point when Jesus Christ died. Followers had to decide if they should wait for his resurrection or wait for the end of the world and kingdom of God. Surely, some followers must of lost faith and assimilated back to the Jewish religion and culture. As time passed, the followers who awaited Jesus' return were forced to decide whether they should abandon belief in Jesus, continue waiting for his return, or reinterpret the beliefs of the community to account for his absence.⁴³

Immediately following the death of Jesus, early followers were awaiting the end of the world. It is possible that some followers reverted back to Jewish culture after Jesus' death, but those who firmly believed in Jesus' apocalyptic message would have more likely viewed Jesus' death as the first act to bring about the eschaton. Those followers would have been awaiting an imminent end. In the earliest Christian texts, such as the undisputed letters of Paul and the Gospel of Mark,⁴⁴ the belief in the imminent end is still present. Those texts contain accounts of people converting to Christianity and they espouse that repentance from sins and belief in Jesus as the Son of God was all one had to do to prepare oneself for the end. Later sources account a shift away from this mindset among believing communities.

The Gospel of Luke, another canonic gospel, was written after Mark and includes many lines from Mark. Luke edited the lines in Mark that make reference to the end of the world. This

⁴³ This paper understands the concept of resurrection, both in the case of Jesus Christ and Haile Selassie, as something that emerges as a statement of faith among each of the movements early followers and then enters the movements' literature.

⁴⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 308. The Undisputed Letters of Paul are dated 40s-50s CE and the Gospel of Mark is dated at 40 CE.

was because the Christian communities were no longer as apocalyptic in that they were not awaiting the imminent end. Luke accounts for an even bigger shift in the believing community, which was the spreading of the message of Christ. In Paul and Mark, repentance and belief in Jesus was enough. In Mark, Jesus claims to only have saved many.⁴⁵ One can interpret the purpose of the early Christ followers was to heal as many people as they could before the end, but never to try to heal everyone. In Luke, there is a distinct shift to convert everyone. Luke is the prequel to Acts,⁴⁶ the story in the bible that includes the Pentecost. The apostles of Jesus speak in tongues to the masses to preach the message of Jesus' resurrection and then each apostle goes out on his own quest to different parts of the world to preach and convert more. The books of Luke and Acts document a shift in the Christian community towards preaching to more people, inside and outside the Judean population, in addition to moving past imminent apocalypticism. There would have been more believing communities emerging in more places, and without the living Jesus to unify and collect followers to one person, each community developed its own interpretation as to who Jesus was and how their belief should be practiced. Because of this, different theological interpretations of Jesus emerged, and disputes among the communities followed.

In the decades following the death of Jesus, especially by the 2nd Century CE, different schools of Christology emerged. There were Jewish-Christian Adoptionists, who believed that

⁴⁵ Mk. 1:32-34. "That evening after sunset the people brought to Jesus all the sick and demon-possessed. The whole town gathered at the door, and Jesus healed many who had various diseases. He also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was." This story is retold in Mt 8:14-18 and Lk 4:38-44. In each retelling, Jesus heals all people who come with demons as opposed to many. This edit likely served to show that Jesus came to save everyone and not just some people. The edit also portrays Jesus as being more powerful to those who would interpret the scene in Mark as implying a lack in his power.

⁴⁶ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 154. Luke and Acts were written by the same writer. They are two separate books first telling the life of Jesus and then the lives of the Apostles after Christ.

Jesus was a man more righteous in Jewish law than any other man, who was chosen by God to be his son. Jesus' baptism marks a literal adoption by God that turned Jesus into his suffering servant.⁴⁷ This school of thought portrays Jesus as being fully human with the divine attributes only added by God on the day of his baptism. This point in time shows that early Christians were asking the question as to how human Jesus was versus how divine he was. Four main schools of diverse thought came around.

Other early Christians followed a belief popularized by second-century scholar and evangelist, Marcion, who claimed that Paul was the only apostle to whom Jesus revealed the true gospel. According to Marcion, Paul, who was a good Jew who obeyed the Law, stopped following the Law after Jesus appeared to him and convinced him to abandon it. Marcion saw the religion preached by Jesus as being so different from the religion of Jewish scripture, that he claimed the Jewish God was different from the God of Jesus. To him, the Jewish God was one who punishes those who disobey, whereas the God of Jesus was one who extends mercy and forgiveness.⁴⁸ This group was not all unified under Marcion, and were scattered across the Mediterranean. These Marcionites differed from the Adoptionists in that they believed Jesus was fully divine and not human.

The debate over Jesus' humanity was only further complicated by Gnostic Christians, who agreed with Marcion that Jesus was not human and fully divine, but for a different reason. They agreed with the Adoptionists in that Jesus was the most righteous man on earth, but his baptism granted him a different reward. The Gnostics were a group of people who believed the God of the Jewish scriptures was an evil god who created the material world. They believed

⁴⁷ Ibid. 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 3-5.

Christ is a divine being who entered the man, Jesus, and gave him the knowledge to escape from the material world. The Gnostics predated Jesus, and had their own belief in spiritual deities and belief in a stratified realm of divine beings. Not every Gnostic believed in Jesus was the savior, but some saw him as the first human given the knowledge to escape from the material world, and the paradigm for themselves to do the same.⁴⁹

It was the Proto-Orthodox Christians who ended up becoming the dominant form of Christianity in later centuries, acquiring more converts than the other three branches of Christology. They emerged around the 2nd Century by making the claim that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, and at least by the 4th Century, had the majority. By the 4th Century, Christianity had grown and spread far enough and that in the year 325 CE, Roman Emperor Constantine I called the first ecumenical council. This council was held in Nicaea and sought to resolve the Christological issue of God the Son in relation to God the Father and establish uniform canon law. While the other schools were still in existence and present at the council, it was the Proto-Orthodox belief that the Council of Nicaea determined to be the truth.⁵⁰ The death of Jesus Christ meant followers of Jesus had to decide if they should abandon the faith, continue to await the end of the world, or adapt the religion to accommodate for the times. Over the first few hundred years of Christianity's existence, the faith went from a small following of apocalyptic believers, to a scattered collection of slinter factions, and eventually moved to becoming a church body. Rastafari faced a similar turning point at the death of Haile Selassie. For as long as he was alive and in power, the Rasta movement was going strong and followers awaited a better tomorrow.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 5-6.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 451.

Selassie was coroneted on April 2, 1930 and deposed on September 12, 1974 as the result of a coup d'état during a socialist revolution in Ethiopia.⁵¹ At the time of his deposition, Selassie was eighty-two years old and had been in power for forty-four years, making him the longest reigning world leader of his day. To Rastas, this longevity was a sign of his divinity – he would keep reigning until the whole world is liberated from oppression. His removal from power was troubling to Rastas, who saw that as Babylon trying to topple the crown. During the months between his deposition and death, Rastas continued to worship as they awaited Selassie's return to power. But on August 28, 1975, the state media reported the Selassie has died from respiratory failure following complications from a prostate operation. Many Ethiopians, Rasta and nonRasta alike, did not believe this claim. Many speculated that he was assassinated following the turmoil of the revolution. Selassie's internment was not revealed to the public, prompting belief many that his death was a hoax and he had not died at all. Nonetheless, Rastas had to address how this death works in the greater scheme of Rasta theology.

William David Spencer, scholar of Rastafari, explores how different Rastas dealt with the problems arising from Selassie's death. If Selassie was God, how could God die? If Jesus was the Son of God and Selassie was God, how could God die twice? Spencer writes about Rastas who lost faith completely in Selassie as God and left the movement in favor of a different religion or spiritual path.⁵² But most Rastas didn't leave the faith. Spencer argues in his book, *Dread Jesus*, that the Rastas who continued practicing Rastafari did one of three things: deny

⁵¹ Leonard E. Barrett Sr., *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 210-212.

⁵² William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 1999), 53. ⁵⁸
Ibid. 54.

that Selassie had died, reinterpret belief in him as the next suffering servant, or abandon belief in him as divine while continuing to be Rasta.⁵⁸

Some Rastas who denied that Selassie had died in 1975 still do so to this day arguing that God cannot be killed. Rastas are accepting of Jesus Christ and the gospel tradition, acknowledging Jesus as the Son of God and the sacrificial lamb. Rasta Michael Rose said God came first as a lamb to slaughter and came again as a conquering lion. Selassie is God and therefore immortal, here on earth to conquer and liberate. This belief raises the question of why Selassie continues to be in exile. Mihlawhdh Faristzaddi answers this in *Itations of Jamaica and I Rastafari*, arguing that Selassie no longer needed the throne in Ethiopia – the necessary prophesies had been fulfilled. He now prepares for the end of the world in secret, where Babylon cannot find him, only to reappear for the revelations.⁵³

Other Rastas accepted the death of Haile Selassie as a repeat of the death of Jesus Christ. These Rastas reinterpreted Leonard Howell's original message of apocalypticism, which claimed that Selassie would topple Babylon and usher in a new era of black uplift. This interpretation of Selassie's death establishes him as the sacrificial lamb that Jesus was, going as far as to say Selassie and Jesus are the same man. Christians believe that Jesus is the Son of God who suffered and died so that sins may be forgiven.⁵⁴ Rastas who believe this interpretation believe Selassie did the same – he came to suffer and die so that a new age can be ushered in before the

⁵³ William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 1999), 55. Some Rastas who hold this belief believe Selassie changed to a spiritual state. Similar to the belief Gnostic Christians have of Jesus, Selassie's death was only the death of a physical body whereas the spiritual body transcended.

⁵⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 417. The Council of Nicaea developed the Nicene Creed, a prophetic statement declaring the doctrinal beliefs of the church.

apocalypse. This interpretation allows Rastas to continue to worship Selassie after his death given the world continued after Jesus' death.

When Selassie died, some Rastas reevaluated him as the object of their worship. Was he a man made divine by God as Howell said, or was he God in the form of a human? Rastas continue to debate this issue to this day, never having reached an answer accepted by all. This debate is reminiscent of the disagreements held by the sects of Christianity in the years after Jesus' death. What sets the sects of Rastafari apart from Christianity is the third interpretation of Selassie's death, which is to accept that he was just a man. In the decades between Howell founding Pinnacle and Selassie's death, Rastafari had established itself as its own culture with rituals, customs, diet, identity, and spiritual beliefs. Some Rastas felt that Rastafari was more than just a new messianic religion – it had become a definitive culture and way of life. Karlene Faith, an administrator for the US Peace Corps, published her collection, *Cargo Cults and Millenarian Movements*, in which she accounted trips to Rasta communities in both Ethiopia and Jamaica. She writes of how the Ethiopian Rastas referred to Selassie as “the living God” whereas the Rastas in Jamaica claimed that he was just a man. The worshippers in Jamaica claimed that “God is all men but no man is God.” Selassie is respected as the figure who inspired the movement but they look beyond him to whom they call God, not a man but rather an all-encompassing world force.⁵⁵

The three largest sects of Rastafari today are the Bobo Ashanti, the Nyahbinghi, and the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Bobo Ashanti are a singular community in Jamaica, still holding true to belief in Selassie. The Nyahbinghi are larger, spanning over several continents and are

⁵⁵ William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 1999), 62-63.

therefore less unified in their beliefs but most still hold to the belief that Selassie is God. The Twelve Tribes is the most liberal sect and the largest by far, having gone global. Many of the more liberal Rastas may still call Selassie God or the Son of God, but they have decentralized him as the focus of Rastafari. In the current state of Rastafari, these sects are unified under common ritualistic practice more heavily than doctrinal theology.⁵⁶ Different members of one sect may differ in their beliefs over how to view Selassie, and these disagreements are acceptable. The sects do not have strict codes of belief by which all members must follow. They all have codes of dress, diet, and rituals by which all members must follow, but not religious creed.

Haile Selassie's death is the biggest turning point in the history of Rastafari. Since the fall of Pinnacle in 1954, Rastas had not been unified in one place, but they all had in common the apocalyptic belief in Selassie being the Messiah and a better world arriving soon. His death divided Rastas across the world and continues to divide Rastas to this day. Rastas may not ever be unified under one belief on this subject; and if so, it will not be anytime soon. In the case of Christianity, an answer to the question of Jesus' humanity versus his divinity was not made doctrinal until 313 CE; and even then, believing communities were still divided. In the early years of Christianity, there was no doctrine at all to which believers could site as evidence of their beliefs. Rastas deal with the same problem today given Rastafari has not documented its doctrine, tenets, or rituals into a few creeds or canonized texts. There has never been an event similar to the Council of Nicaea put in place to canonize law. But Christianity was around for

⁵⁶ Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*. (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 164-165.

centuries before Nicaea, existing not as a singular church but rather as a web of scattered communities united only by a few beliefs. Rastafari is in that same place now.

The development of Christianity serves as a paradigm for the development of Rastafari. Both faiths started as messianic cults, small believing communities formed by the outlier class in a hierarchical society. When Jesus Christ was still alive, his followers were unified under his leadership, but his death divided them into many groups that spread and developed differing beliefs. Rastafari was unified under Leonard Howell in the first decade of Pinnacle, but when Howell and Pinnacle were gone, his followers scattered with different beliefs just as Jesus' followers did.

It took Christianity a few centuries to develop into a unified and organized church body. But even when the Council of Nicaea was called in the Fourth Century CE, it was never completely unified. If the development of Christianity is a paradigm, then Rastafari is moving towards the same direction of becoming a more unified and organized religious body.

Christianity started out as an apocalyptic faith, not in need of an organized church body or formal set of doctrine on account of the imminent end of the world. But since the end of the world did not come and the first wave of church leaders died out, becoming more formalized and organized became necessary for the longevity of the religion. The sects of Rastafari continue to grow in size⁵⁷ and as new leadership continues to replace old leadership, the sects will be encouraged to define their ritual systems and doctrinal beliefs more stringently.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 262-265. The number of Rastas in the Caribbean, United States, United Kingdom, and Africa continue to increase each decade.

Christianity was able to survive after the death of its founder and messiah. Jesus' following may have been awaiting an apocalypse that did not come, be un-unified in belief systems, and be scattered among a large geographic area. But as time passed, Christianity continued to thrive, progressively breaking away from its status as an offshoot of Judaism and becoming legitimized as its own distinct branch of Abrahamic religion. Scholars of Rastafari differ in opinions as to what the next step for the religion will be. William David Spencer predicted in *Dread Jesus* that Rastas will progressively lose faith in Selassie as the messiah. This will inspire followers of Rastafari to revert to its Christian roots and rejoin Christianity.⁵⁸ Leonard E. Barrett Sr. wrote in *The Rastafarians* that faith in Selassie will continue to wane and Rastafari will come to resemble and merge with the Ethiopian Tewahedo Church.⁵⁹ But Rastafari has shown that even with Selassie decentralized in some sects, it can continue to grow because the Rasta way of life means more to some followers than Selassie does. While Rastafari moves towards greater organization, it does not move back towards its roots in the Christian church. It instead moves towards resembling a church of its own. Rastafari will continue to grow and formalize until it becomes established and respected as its own unique branch of Abrahamic religion.

⁵⁸ William David Spencer, *Dread Jesus* (London: Holy Trinity Church, 1999), 208-209.

⁵⁹ Leonard E. Barrett Sr., *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 193-194.

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