Rastafarianism has approximately seven hundred thousand followers worldwide and therefore cannot be regarded as one of the major religions of this era, yet most westerners are familiar with it. During the Seventies musicians such as Jimmy Cliff and Bob Marley gave worldwide prominence to Rastafarianism with their distinctive reggae music.

For true followers or believers, however, Rastafarianism implies considerably more than pulsating rhythms, Rasta dreadlocks and the smoking of dagga (ganja). Rastafarianism may, in a certain sense, be regarded as a religion and alternative way of life that evolved out of a political ideal, which raises the hopes of thousands of Rastafarians of a future free from suffering and oppression by Babylon (the mainly white political structures of the day - see History of Rastafarianism).

General doctrines

Because Rastafarianism is not an organised religion with a specific individual as leader, and a central form of organisation, one can hardly speak of a Rastafarian dogma or confession of faith that clearly defines the religious convictions of Rastafarians. Some Rastafarians regard the political objectives of the group to be more important than the religious aspects, while others find peace and quiet in the Rastafarian lifestyle. There are, nevertheless, a few general convictions that may be regarded as being central to Rastafarianism.

Lion of Judah in Ethiopia

The Rastafarian name for God is Jah. Most Rastafarians believe Jah to be a spirit in essence, but that Haile Selassie I, King of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1975, is the manifestation of the Living Saviour of the black race. His complete Rastafarian titles are “His Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, Elected One of God, Light of the World, King of Zion”.

ABOVE: A typical Rastafarian “dread-man”.

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ABOVE: Haile Selassie I, King of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1975.

Differences on character of divinity Rastafarians have different opinions as to what exactly Haile Selassie’s divinity implies. The so-called Orthodox Rastafarians hold the opinion that Selassie is divine as an icon (holy image of God serving as channel for the flowing of divine energy to the world). He must therefore be honoured as image of God and God must be worshiped through him, as in portraits of Christ and the Virgin Mary in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Others, amongst whom the so-called Twelve Tribes of Israel, believe Selassie himself to be God (Jah) in his fullness, and that he therefore ought to be worshiped as the Living God.

The fact is that both groups regard Haile Selassie as the long-awaited Messiah who will liberate blacks worldwide from oppression and slavery and return them to their own country (Africa).

Devoted Christian Before his coronation in 1930, Selassie’s name was Ras Tafari Makonnen, and those who regard him as Jah and redeemer, call themselves Rastafarians (also Rastas, or ‘dreads’). It is quite interesting to note that Haile Selassie himself was not a Rastafarian, but a devoted Christian.

When Haile Selassie died in 1975, most Rastafarians at first refused to accept the fact that he had actually died, since they believed that he and all devout Rastas were immortal. Afterwards his death was explained in various ways, one of which was that his atoms had spread all over the globe and that he was thus immortalised in all babies that were ever born. Others pointed out that his divinity did not die with him, but lives on in the lives of individual Rastafarians.

Babylon

Babylon is the Rastafarian term for white political power structures that have oppressed and enslaved blacks for centuries. Some say that more than a hundred million blacks were forcibly taken from Africa as slaves. Rastas believe that even though this form of slavery has been abolished, blacks are still being kept back globally by the forces of Babylon by, among other things, poverty, illiteracy and political inequality.
They believe that blacks need to be reminded of their right to freedom and should be encouraged to rise against Babylon. Although most Rastafarians propagate non-violence, there are those who are of the opinion that the power and structures of Babylon ought to be overthrown by a violent revolution in order to liberate blacks.

Holy Scriptures

The Christian Bible (preferably the King James Version) is regarded as Holy Scriptures by most Rastafarians, but they believe that large parts of it have been altered and rewritten by the forces of Babylon and therefore cannot be accepted out of hand.

Prior to Haile Selassie's death, references to the Lion of the Tribe of Judah (for example in Revelation 5:5) were regarded as proof that he was God who had established his kingdom in Ethiopia and would reign eternally from there. Even after his death he is still regarded as the Lion of Judah, although the nature of his rule and kingdom are now interpreted more spiritually.

Other Rastafarians regard the Holy Piby, an occult bible that they say has been translated from Amharic, as the Holy Scripture. The Holy Piby especially endorses the idea that white Babylon should be destroyed so that the dispersed Israelites may return to Africa, the true Zion.

Heaven on earth in Africa

Rastafarians do not believe in the immortality of the human soul or life after death. For this reason there is no heaven or hell to which one's soul goes after death. For some Ethiopia, a name that is not limited to the modern state only, but applies to the whole African continent, is heaven on earth.
In principle it is also the Rastafarian’s desire to be liberated from the slavery in which he finds himself as an exile abroad (for example in Jamaica, America and Europe) in order to return to a glorious existence in Africa. They believe Jah will make this global black exodus possible at an appointed future time and in the meantime each Rastafarian must prepare himself for it.

I and I

The expression ‘I and I’ is commonly heard as part of the Rastafarian’s colloquial speech. It indicates that no human being is more exalted or more important than another. All people are equal. ‘I and I’ points out the oneness of two persons. The Rasta therefore uses ‘I and I’ instead of ‘you and I’ to illustrate that both persons are exactly equal, and also that Jah is present in all people and that they are united by his presence.

There are also Rastafarians who regard blacks as the supreme race, and they apply this equality of human beings only to Rastas or blacks.

Ganja (marijuana/cannabis/dagga)

Rastafarians have come into prominence globally for openly smoking marijuana and encouraging others to do so too. They refer to the drug as ‘ganja’, ‘iley’, ‘callie’ (sic) or holy herbs and it is smoked mainly for religious reasons, but also for various medicinal reasons.
Rastas regard various Bible verses as injunctions by Jah to use marijuana, such as: ‘It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field’ (Gen 3:18); and ‘Better a meal of vegetables where there is love than a fattened calf with hatred’ (Prov 15:17). The Rasta’s state of consciousness is changed by the use of marijuana and in this transformed state he believes that he is susceptible to the revelation that Haile Selassie is God and that Ethiopia is the country of blacks.

![Rastaman smoking ganja in his “chalice”](image)

The ritual smoking of marijuana is regarded as a duty. Before a Rasta commences with a major task or undertakes a journey, he performs this ritual that is accompanied by prayer. The pipe in which the marijuana is smoked in the execution of this duty, is called a chalice or cup. Should members be smoking marijuana cigarettes (‘spliffs’), these are put down and all headgear is removed before the pipe is lit. The pipe is passed along anti-clockwise from one Rasta to another while all pray in silence.

### Food

The devout Rastafarian eats only ital food. Ital is a Rasta term that means ‘pure’ and ‘clean’ and ital food is natural food that contains no chemicals and is not preserved in cans. The food is cooked, but is eaten as raw as possible without any salts, colourants or preservatives.

Most Rastafarians are vegetarians, but those who do eat meat, may under no circumstances eat pork, crayfish, crab or the meat of any other beast of prey. Ordinary fish is permissible, provided that the fish is no longer than twelve inches (approximately 30 cm). Drinks containing alcohol, coffee, milk and fizzy drinks are regarded as unnatural and for this reason preference is given to different kinds of tea and water.

### Rastafarian Symbols

**Colours** Among the best-known Rastafarian symbols are the colours red, black and green. Red symbolises the triumphant church of the Rastas and also symbolises the blood of blacks who died
as martyrs through the ages. Black symbolises the peoples of Africa and green the beauty of nature in Ethiopia. Some also regard green as symbolising dagga (which is green), which plays such a vital role in the religious practices of Rastafarians. Sometimes yellow is added to symbolise the wealth of Ethiopia.

Dreadlocks: The characteristic Rasta locks (‘dreadlocks’), the Rastafarian hairstyle, symbolise the Lion of Judah, Haile Selassie. They are worn long in obedience to the Old Testament regulation for priests: "Priests must not shave their heads or shave off the edges of their beards ..." (Lev. 21:5). The locks also symbolise the origin of the Rasta, rooted in Africa, and are to some a token of resistance against the accepted norms of respectability prescribed by the Babylon system.

ABOVE: Lion of Judah-symbol.

Lion of Judah: The Lion of Judah is of course the symbol of Haile Selassie, conqueror and redeemer. Just as the lion is the king of the animal kingdom, Selassie is the king of kings. It is claimed that Selassie wore a ring bearing the symbol of the Lion of Judah, and that after his death this ring was presented to Bob Marley. Whether this actually happened and what became of the ring after Marley died, is not known.

The role of women

In general women have a subservient role in Rastafarianism. Their main duties include giving birth to children, building fires, preparing meals, and serving the men. They use no make-up or perfume and are expected rather to wear conservative clothes that are neither extravagant nor provocative.

Women may not wear men’s clothing such as long trousers and their heads must preferably be covered. A woman is regarded to be unclean during menstruation and may not have contact with men. Women do not participate with men in religious practices such as the ritual smoking of marijuana.

Other doctrines

Other doctrines endorsed in varying degree by different groups of Rastafarians are that:
• the devil actually is the god of the whites;

• Jesus Christ and Mary were blacks;

• the Bible contains mainly figurative language and should not be interpreted literally; and

• Rastafarians are the reincarnation of the ancient tribes of Israel that were carried off into slavery and exile by the white agents of Babylon.

Some Rastafarians also believe that God first revealed himself to man in the person of Moses. Moses was the first reincarnation (avatar, see Hinduism) of Jah that came to earth to help mankind. Later Elijah was the second avatar and Jesus Christ the third. Haile Selassie, however, is the perfect avatar. [Also see History of Rastafarianism.]