

Jesus was a Dreadlocks: Rastafarian Images of Divinity

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The Rastafarian movement arose in the early twentieth century in Jamaica, focused around the figure of His Imperial Majesty, the Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I who, on November 2nd, 1930, was crowned King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah.¹

The newly crowned monarch asserted - and his faithful subjects believed - that he was the only true lineal descendant of David and the 225th of a line of Ethiopian kings stretching in unbroken succession from the time of the legendary Queen of Sheba to the present.²

This coronation, which made Selassie the only monarch of African descent on the planet at that time, was seen by the descendants of the slaves of Jamaica, who regarded themselves as Africans in exile, as the culmination of human and divine history, and they saw in this event the fulfilment of Biblical prophecy, especially regarding the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. To the ex-slave peoples of Jamaica, who predominantly composed the lowest levels of Jamaican society, and were therefore the greatest victims of colonial and post-colonial oppression, the advent of Selassie came as a sure sign that their period of exile was at an end; Christ, in the form of Selassie, had surely come for them, bringing Zion on earth (and a return to their true home, Africa) for the black man, and destruction for the forces of Babylon, the white oppressive society which had dominated the world since Biblical times. When this millennial hope did not physically materialise, the conception of redemption changed. For some, the path of redemption would involve living an Ital³ life, as

¹ These titles are derived from the Book of Revelation 19:16, and are seen by Rastas as proof of the divinity of Selassie: if he is not divine, and has not come to fulfil Biblical prophecy, why would he assume these titles? He is given a total of seventy-two biblical titles, derived from many different parts of the Bible.

² Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians: A Study in Messianic Cultism in Jamaica*, 1967 (Institute of Caribbean Studies Monograph 6, Puerto Rico, 1968), p. 70.

³ Probably derived from 'vital'; the Rastafarian way of living life. Is mainly concerned with Biblically-based dietary regulations: no pork (and generally

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

they held Jesus did. For others, repatriation would not be a physical, but a spiritual reality, a return of the soul to true knowledge, an awareness of divinity, a discovery of the Christ-consciousness inherent in us all.

The Rastas have been portrayed as being un-Christian, or even anti-Christian, due to their recognition of the divinity of Selassie¹, but this is not the case; they merely have a different understanding of the nature and role of Jesus in the world. Within the Rastafarian framework, Christ is 'a title rather than just a name',² in a fashion similar to that of sages within the Buddhist or Hindu traditions; not exclusively divine, but possessed of greater awareness of our innate divinity than normal. This divine connection to God is not, according to the Rastas, exclusive to Jesus, but is available to all, if only we have the wisdom to see.³ 'For Christ, the true Mystic Saviour, is no man, but the DIVINE PRINCIPLE in every human being'.⁴ Christ, in this sense, is seen as being no different from God, and we are all equally able to participate in this divinity.

As a development of this teaching, that each and every human being is divine and of the same nature as Jah, as the Rastas call their God,⁵ it is acknowledged that at certain points in human history, various figures have appeared who manifest their divinity in a greater-than-normal fashion. These figures, who have appeared as prophets and sages throughout recorded history, are regarded by the Rastafarians as being useful guides on the path to wisdom, and their teachings (as found in sources such as the Bible) are studied and reasoned about by the brethren, to reach ever-greater levels of

little meat), no salt, avoidance of alcohol, and general favouring of fresh, natural foods, primarily fruit and vegetables.

- 1 See, for example, Roger Ringenberg, *Rastafarianism: An Expanding Jamaican Cult*, Kingston, 1978; Terence B. Rose, 'Emerging Social Problems in Jamaica and their Pastoral Implications', *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 6:1 (Apr 1985), pp. 29-45; or Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica*, Kingston, 1976, pp. 103-4.
- 2 Owens, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- 3 Virginia Lee Jacobs, *Roots of Rastafari*, San Diego, 1985, p. 29.
- 4 Mihilawhdh Faristzaddi, *Itations of Jamaica and I Rastafari: The Second Itation (Jah Revelation)*, Florida, 1991, no page numbers.
- 5 Generally connected with the conventional conception of God the Father; the name appears to be derived from Yahweh or Jehovah, and is found in the King James Version of the Bible (Psalm 68:4). Why it has been adopted by the Rastas is not known.

Jesus was a Dreadlocks

comprehension, or what they call *overstanding*.¹ In the Rastafarian conception of history, there have been seventy-two such manifestations of greater divinity,² regarded as Jah in the flesh, the last (and greatest) being His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, the (now late) Emperor of Ethiopia³. Further to this, approximately every 2000 years, at the conclusion (or commencement - the sources are not clear) of each new era, in a manner similar to the Hindu concept of the *avatara*, God incarnates more fully than at other times: this has resulted in the incarnations of Elijah, Jesus, and Selassie, the greatest figures in human history. Apart from these, however, many other figures recorded in the Bible are believed to have been the embodiment of God in the flesh, including many of the Hebrew prophets: as one Rasta has been quoted as saying, 'Haile Selassie, Jesus Christ, Solomon, David, Moses and Aaron are all black and are all the same person'.⁴

To understand how this is possible, a recognition of the way in which Rastas view time is essential. For them, time follows a cyclical pattern, but proceeds in a linear fashion: that is, the events of history repeat themselves, but ultimately draw toward a conclusion, as the awareness of the participants is refined through their activities. The culmination of this process, according to the Rastafarians, is the coming of Selassie, who brought redemption for all, if not directly then through the path of wisdom and awareness taught by the Rastafarians. Thus, the past serves not only as a learning tool for the present, a means by which we are able to establish our place in the world, but is also seen to provide a template for the present: the events which are currently taking place have occurred before, and in much the same fashion. Thus, in Rastafarian cosmology, the current situation of the Africans, taken from their homeland by European oppressors to serve in slavery, is seen reflected in the Biblical accounts of the slavery of the Jews in Egypt. Similarly, the parallels between the past and the present give further evidence, in the eyes of the Rastas, of the guiding hand of Jah in the progress of human history, and also of their own role in that progress. Just as redemption occurred for the Jews, so too must it come for the Africans.

1 To *understand* is to 'stand under', that is, to be dominated by; to *overstand* is to assume the superior position, indicating a complete grasp of the truth, a position desirable to the Rasta.

2 Perhaps related to the seventy-two titles attributed to Selassie.

3 Owens, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 141.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

Further to this, the connection is not seen in the simple terms of allegory: the Africans are not merely undergoing an experience similar to the Jews, but *are* in fact the true Jewish people, undergoing additional tribulations for straying from the path of Jah. The souls of the people involved in Biblical events are believed to be reincarnated in the bodies of those undergoing the same events today. This identification of certain continuing presences throughout the course of human history is reflected not only in the Elijah-Jesus-Selassie continuum, but also in the connection between current figures and their predecessors: Marcus Garvey, a champion of black rights who is regarded as a prophet by the Rastas, for his prophecy that Africans should 'Look to Africa, when a black king shall be crowned, for the day of deliverance is near',¹ is believed to be the reincarnation of John the Baptist.² In a similar fashion, various Rasta leaders are believed to be incarnations of other figures: Prince Emmanuel Edwards, leader of the Ethiopian National Congress (a group now known as Buba Shanti), is also likened to Christ; and the Rev. Claudius Henry is seen as Cyrus, who led the Jews from captivity (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1-13). Similarly, Elizabeth II, a current leader of the oppressive white system, is seen as the incarnation of Elizabeth I, who instigated the African slave trade. A similar connection has been found to exist in a collective fashion: the Africans *are* the Jews; the Americans represent the Rome of Christ's time, indulging in luxury and exploitation; and the Catholic Church (and Christianity in general) is the Great Whore of Babylon spoken of in the Book of Revelation. Many similar examples may be found, and the correlation of past and present events seems to be a favourite Rasta pastime.

This teaching has led to the doctrine of reincarnation, not in the Hindu sense³, whereby a soul undergoes a process of transmigration from body to body, but rather as *re*-incarnation, a supra-normal force taking on material form, similar to the Tibetan idea of the *tulku*. Thus, the spirit which inhabited the body of Elijah, Moses, Abraham, and Jesus is identical, and is seen by Rastas as also inhabiting the form of Selassie, the difference between these being one of time: 'Jesus *was*. Rastafari *is*'.⁴ The nature and purpose of

¹ M. G. Smith, Roy Augier, and Rex Nettleford, *Report on the Rastafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*, Kingston, 1960, p. 2.

² Joseph Owens, 'The Rastafarians of Jamaica'; in Idris Hamid (ed), *Troubling of the Waters: A Collection of Papers and Responses Presented at Two Conferences on Creative Theological Reflection.*, Trinidad, 1973, p. 167.

³ Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Jesus was a Dreadlocks

these various manifestations are the same, but each appears at a given time and place to fulfil a role.

It would appear that Jesus' role in the course of his life was twofold: first, to oppose the forces of oppression (including the Roman state and the conventional religious authorities), in this providing the impetus for the Rasta's own rejection of European-derived society; and second, to support the downtrodden masses, who were kept in ignorance by a repressive regime. Additionally, and in fulfilling both of these functions, Jesus provided guidance in the correct lifestyle one must follow to attain knowledge of divinity, which guidance the Rastafarians have, in combination with an interpretation of Jewish law, sought to implement into their livity,¹ taking on the role of Jesus in contemporary society. His support of simplicity, naturalness, contentment, and love are embraced by contemporary Rastas, who hold to the idea of Jesus being a dreadlocks Rasta: black, vegetarian, a Nazarite (and thus under vows not to cut his hair, eat pork, or break other Jewish laws), non-violent (except for the overthrow of Babylon), and preaching a message of universal love.²

Much more important in terms of salvation is the fact that Jesus, according to the Rastas, taught a form of gnosticism, some evidence of which has survived, albeit in a greatly obscured form. As already mentioned, Rastafarians hold to the immanence of Jah in creation, and the necessity of inner knowledge to the process of redemption. Like many gnostic movements throughout history, some find the accounts of the resurrection of both Jesus and Lazarus to provide evidence not of a physical but spiritual rebirth:

This resurrection can never be monopolised by 'the Christians' but is the SPIRITUAL BIRTH RIGHT of every human being endowed with soul and spirit, whatever his religion may be. Such an individual becomes, and is a Christ-Man.³

The 'born again' to which Jesus refers (John 3:3), then, is not physical (thus the Rasta rejection of baptism by water), but mental

¹ 'Livity' roughly translates as 'lifeways'. It refers to the regulative practices of the Rasta faith.

² There are many sources of information about Rastafarian lifestyle. See especially: Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians: Sounds of Cultural Dissonance*, Boston, 1977; Barry Chevannes (ed.), *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean World Views*, London, 1995; and Smith, *op. cit.*

³ Faristzaddi, *op. cit.* no page numbers.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

and spiritual,¹ and refers to a complete change of consciousness, through the acquisition of wisdom. Thus, the resurrection is to eternal life *in this life*, not at some future time, and *in this body*, not as a spirit.

Contrary to their perceptions of the Christian Church, Rastafarians teach that their god is a god of the living, not of the dead.² The Bible is cited in support of this: of Moses it was said 'no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day' (Deuteronomy 34:6), this providing, in Rasta reasoning, evidence that Moses did not die; Elijah also 'went up in a chariot of fire [(2 Kings 2:11)]'.³ Jesus, too, is believed to have escaped death:

[a]fter completing his mission Christ was not crucified, nor did he die in any other way... he disappeared or went into another realm. The 'real' Jesus overcame death, continued to live on, and came again for the last time in the person of Haile Selassie.⁴

Selassie himself, who appeared to die in 1975, is also claimed to have similarly disappeared, as no body was ever produced and no gravesite ever revealed. In reflection of this, a large number of stories have arisen around the circumstances of the apparent 'death' of Selassie, foremost of which is that he entered his chapel on the morning of his disappearance, and simply never reappeared. Death is understood to be the natural result of sin⁵, so these men, being direct manifestations of godhood, and thus without sin, could not have died. This reasoning applies to all, including the Rastas themselves, who utterly reject the acceptance of death, and believe that if they live correctly, with full knowledge of their divine identity, they too will not die.

Further, the Rastas argue, if Jesus is God, as the Christian Churches have always taught, then he could never die, or else all creation would die with him.⁶ Indeed, so central is the process of creation to Rastafarian theology that it is believed that if one does not create, and thus act out the purpose of one's existence (and the true purpose of one's divinity), then dissolution is the result.⁷ Jah is

¹ Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³ Barrett 1977, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁴ Peter B. Clarke, *Black Paradise: The Rastafarian Movement*, (Black Political Studies, Number Five), The Borgo Press, California, 1994, p. 67.

⁵ Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 136.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Jesus was a Dreadlocks

seen to manifest most clearly through one's works, and thus everyone is able to participate in the unfolding of the world, thereby placing the fate of the world in human hands: 'If man does not undertake to re-create the world through development of himself, there is no hope'.¹ It is through 'vitality and integrity' that one demonstrates that Christ is alive and active within man today.² As one Rasta states:

The issue of the Roman system is to show to people that Christ is dead, but the principle of the orthodox is to show you that Christ is alive, incarnate with man -within man - so that your soul, your mind, your body, your structure becomes one.³

This is not to deny the crucifixion of Jesus: the idea of this embodiment of Jah suffering at the hands of Babylon is most significant, if it is correctly understood as 'a purely allegorical and philosophical symbol'.⁴

The dilemma for humans, and for black people in particular, is that these events have *not* been understood or taught in this fashion. Indeed, whilst those who follow Rastafari are not anti-Jesus, they are anti-Church, an institution they observe has helped the powers of Rome oppress the African throughout history. It is held that, through teaching about a dead, white, passive god, who allowed the forces of Babylon to harass and eventually kill him, the white authorities attempted to induce a state of ignorance and apathy in the African people, and largely succeeded, causing them to forget their relationship with Jah and their pivotal role in human history.⁵

It is [the Christian preachers] who are denying the black man his true destiny by daily representing to him a God who expects them to be humble and to bear suffering and shame in this life for an imaginary heaven somewhere in the sky after death. To the Rastafarians who believe in life eternal in the here and now, this doctrine is a total farce.⁶

The god of the white people is seen to be in keeping with their nature:

1 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

2 *Ibid.*, pp. 108, 129.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 107.

4 Faristzaddi, *op. cit.* no page numbers.

5 Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

6 Barrett 1967, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

The white man's God is a different God from that of the Rastafarians. He is actually the devil, the instigator of all evils that have come upon the world, the God of hate, blood, oppression and war,¹

and thus is correctly understood to be Satan, not god. This is supported by the belief that one's actions are a reflection of the divinity within: if one's realisation is advanced, it will be evident through one's actions. The actions of the colonial authorities, especially in the treatment of the African slaves, demonstrate the nature of their god, much more readily than any blond-haired, blue-eyed painting could do.

This misrepresentation of Jah is also seen in the matter of his colour. If, reasoned the Rastas, man was made in god's image (Genesis 1:27), and they are black, then surely their god must be black. Jeremiah 8:21 was also felt to support the identification of Jah as black: 'For the hurt of the daughter of my people I am hurt; I am black...' It was felt that 'the white God of Christianity can help only the white man',² so a new image of god was needed, 'a god as seen through black men's eyes discarding the questionable or mythical dogma of a European Jesus crucified'.³

Without compromise, we say that we cannot see God through the spectacles of Rome. We cannot see God through the spectacles of the Asiatic. We have to see God through black man's eyes. That's why we see our God as a black man today, who comes to break oppression and set the captives free.⁴

Everyone must therefore seek their own God, both individually and collectively, and encourage others to do likewise. As one Rasta observed: 'Jesus Christ was of all colours and spoke to men in all tongues, so that all men could understand. He speak to me in Jamaican patois'.⁵ It is unreasonable, it is held, to ask one people to submit to the foreign conception of another,⁶ as the Europeans had done throughout history.

1 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 99.

4 Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 114. This is itself a paraphrase of Garvey (see Barrett, *Cultural Dissonance*, p. 77.)

5 *Ibid.*, p. 105.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Jesus was a Dreadlocks

The differentiation between the Christian and the Rastafarian conceptions of Jesus is perhaps best demonstrated in the different pronunciations of the name itself.¹ The name of 'Jeezus', as the establishment would have it, is believed by the Rastas to be a corruption of the original Amharic, the classical language of Ethiopia (and the language in which they believe the Bible to have been composed). This falsification, it is believed, was perpetrated in order to deceive the slaves, by hiding Jesus' true nature. This nature is reflected in the correct pronunciation: 'Jess-us', the first syllable sounding like Jesse, the father of King David (and hence of Jesus and Selassie), a significance not lost on the Rastafarians. This name is interpreted in Jamaican patois as either 'just us' (thus indicating the connection of the individual with divinity), or 'justice', a better sign of what Jesus stands for, especially in his messianic role as Selassie, redeemer of the African people. Thus, by modifying the pronunciation of just one syllable, an entirely different meaning is possible: this demonstrates the power of words (and a correct understanding of their usage) in Rastafarian reasoning.²

The use of deception, and an evident example of the potential wisdom gained from a faulty source, is most obviously demonstrated in the Rastafarian use of the Bible. The Bible as it currently exists is highly suspect, and not to be trusted at face value. Originally, the Rastas hold, the Bible was written in Amharic, but in the process of translating '[c]ertain sections of the scriptures... were deliberately distorted to fit the religious ideas of that day and time, by the translators at the instruction of James I of England'.³ Further evidence of 'Roman' tampering with the text is seen in the existence of hidden sections of the Bible: the Apocrypha, for example, is left out in many editions, especially the Book of Maccabees, which it is believed contains special truths for the black race that the white authorities have tried to hide.⁴ 'Still, the Bible contains truth, and if studied in the spirit of Rastafari, light will be thrown upon it and a true interpretation can be achieved'.⁵ Reading the Bible with the support of the reasoning of Rastafari seems, at least according to Rastafarians, to be supported by Selassie, Jah

1 This is more fully covered in *ibid.*, pp. 106-7, note.

2 This is a separate topic in itself: see, for example, Rebekah Michele Mulvaney, *Rastafari and Reggae: A Dictionary and Sourcebook*, Connecticut, 1990; or Velma Pollard, 'The Social History of Dread Talk'; *Caribbean Quarterly* 28:4 (1982), pp. 17-40.

3 Barrett 1967, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

4 Barry Chevannes, *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*, New York, 1994, p. 117.

5 Barrett 1967, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

Rastafari, himself: he is quoted as saying ‘... by reading the Bible, [people] should find truth for themselves’.¹

The Bible, due to its deliberate distortion, needs to be interpreted, not only to ensure that the most edifying sections are read, but also to see beyond the Babylonian interpretations with which most are indoctrinated. This involves, as Cashmore observes, a mental erasure of the concepts learned during childhood, and a rewriting in the truth of Rastafari.² This rewriting is done primarily through the validation of ideas by using the Bible, these ideas often coming in the form of reasoning (discussions) of Rastafarian doctrine with those who already have realisation, dreams and visions (a possible survival of African spirit-based religion³), or through the smoking of the sacred herb, ganja, which the Rastas maintain provides insight into the immanence of Jah,⁴ a necessary tool if one is to correctly distinguish truth from deliberate falsehood.

A knowledge of how to read the Bible, in conjunction with the direct insights gained through experience of the divinity inherent within themselves, has enabled the Rastafarians to see the real purpose behind several basic teachings of the Christian Church. One of the major ideas rejected by the Rastafarians but taught by the Church concerns the nature of heaven. In accordance with the Rastafarian conception of god in man and man in god, and the rejection of the hold of death on a righteous person, Rastafari teaches that those who have knowledge of Haile Selassie and their own identification with Jah ‘enter into happiness and the good life here on earth’.⁵ The idea of heaven, it is seen, was taught by the Church to give Babylon some hold over the Africans who, having also been given false information about the passivity of Christ and the promises of eternal reward for suffering in the here and now, would bear their lowly station in hope of enjoying paradise in the world to come.⁶ Rastas know that their god is a god of the living, not of the dead; thus, one need not die to see god,⁷ but rather is able to experience one’s connection with him, and thereby enjoy the rewards of heaven, in *this* very life and in *this* very body. The

1 *Ibid.*, p. 143.

2 Ernest Ellis Cashmore, *Rastaman: The Rastafarian Movement in England*, London, 1983 (2nd ed), (1979), p. 74.

3 Chevannes, *op.cit.*, p. 19.

4 Barrett 1967, *op. cit.*, p. 142.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

6 Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 140.

Jesus was a Dreadlocks

human body thus becomes a temple, wherein one fully joins in union and identification with Jah.

This is another point on which the Rastafarians hold that the Church has tried to deceive them: the discorporeality of god. Jah, they hold, is not solely transcendent, but to be 'experienced only within man and upon earth. God is *not* a spirit. God is *not* 'up there' in the sky somewhere. God is not an extraterrestrial being that we experience only vaguely'.¹ If Jah were not in the flesh, he would be inaccessible to human sensibility.² This concept is linked to the role of Jah in creation: like a word, spirit alone has no power; it must first 'take on the flesh of action' before it is able to become a vital, living force in the world.³ Thus, a fusion of material and spiritual must take place: god and man in one being: as Owens expresses it, 'God is man and man is God'.⁴ This occurs within each of us, as we develop in wisdom, but is most obvious in figures like Jesus and Selassie.

If god is a spirit, as Rastas see the conventional Christian churches teaching, he is little more than a *duppie*, in Jamaican folk tradition a ghost, and as such is regarded as having little power, except over the dead. The god of the living must, according to the Rastas, also be a living entity. Spirits, in African religious life, are associated with the dead, and whilst other African-Caribbean religions⁵ focus on the spirit world for their operation, the Rastas reject the world of the dead entirely: it is with the living that they have their concern. The suggestion, therefore, that god is a *duppie*, or ghost is, to the Rasta, patently absurd: the god of life eternal (in the flesh, what is more) has nothing to do with the dead. Similarly, if God does not have a physical form, he cannot be understood by humankind, which understanding forms one of the central tenets of Rastafarian livity.

For Rastafarians, the redemptive role of Jesus is not necessary: existence and salvation are seen, as in Buddhist or Hindu practice, as being dependent on knowledge and wisdom, and not on the erasure of sin. Thus no redemptive death is necessary to atone for the sins of all humanity. Rather, a process of the development of inner knowledge is required to dissolve the false conceptions and lethargy imposed by the idea of an external redeemer. Jah, as the Rastafari

¹ Owens 1973, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

² Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁴ Owens 1973, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁵ *Vodun* in Haiti, *Santeria* in Cuba, *Shango* in Trinidad, and *Kumina* in Jamaica, to name but a few.

This Immense Panorama: Studies in Honour of Eric J. Sharpe

have named their supreme being, is immanent in the material world. As such, all have equal access to him, and indeed the path of Rastafari is one in which one's connection with Jah, and identification of oneself as divine, of the same nature as God, is not only encouraged, but mandatory. Wisdom, gained through direct experience rather than through mere book-learning or belief, as the European education system and traditional Christianity preach, is the path to understanding the true nature of the self. 'The Jesus preached by the white man was one that the slaves only *learned* about, not one that they personally experienced'.¹ To develop this personal knowledge, as opposed to belief, is to develop an awareness of the self as Jah, and to connect with the Christ within.

¹ Owens 1976, *op. cit.*, p. 107.