

Contents

Foreword by Stephen C. A. Jennings | ix

Prologue | xi

Acknowledgments | xix

1 Introduction | 1

2 Review of the Literature | 20

3 The Wisdom Songs of Bob Marley | 38

4 The Mission Songs of Bob Marley | 101

5 Conclusion | 144

Epilogue | 147

Appendix A: Tables | 151

Appendix B: Figures | 156

Discography | 159

Filmography | 160

Bibliography | 161

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1

Introduction

AN INTERNATIONAL MUSIC SUPERSTAR . . . AND HIS BIBLE

AT THE TIME OF his death on May 11, 1981, Bob Marley was the internationally known “King of Reggae.”¹ His body lay in state for two days in the National Heroes Arena in Kingston, holding the Bible in one hand and his favorite Gibson Les Paul guitar in the other.² These were the tools of Marley’s trade, held throughout the stages of his artistic and spiritual paths: from ska (pre-1966) to rock steady (circa 1966–1968) to reggae (post-1968); and from pre-Rasta (pre-1966) to Rasta (1966–1980) to Ethiopian Orthodoxy (1980–1981). Setting aside Marley’s spiritual development for a moment, following is a brief sketch of his artistic stages.

The ska genre originated in Jamaica in the late 1950s and incorporated elements of Caribbean mento and calypso with American jazz and R&B. Marley’s first compositions were ska songs recorded for producer Leslie Kong’s Beverley’s label from 1961–1963, and for producer Clement “Sir

1. White, “King of Reggae,” 25.

2. Marley, *My Life*, 172. White adds that the Bible was “open to the Twenty-third Psalm” (*Catch a Fire*, 27).

The Bible and Bob Marley

Coxsone” Dodd’s Studio One label from 1963–1966.³ Ska is characterized by a rapid tempo with consistent accents on the offbeat—the eighth note following each of the four beats per measure. A good example is Marley’s song “One Love,” originally released in 1965, with a tempo of 120 beats per minute (BPM) and consistent offbeat accents. Rock steady was the transitional genre between ska and reggae. Whereas ska was influenced more by jazz and R&B, rock steady was influenced more by American soul. The tempo was moderate and the offbeat was not always as emphasized as in ska. A good example is Marley’s song “Rocking Steady,” from 1968, with a tempo of seventy-six BPM and less accentuated offbeat. Marley’s rock steady recordings were generally released on his own Wail ‘N’ Soul ‘M label from 1966–1968 because, as biographer Timothy White states, he was “[t]ired of being ripped off by local producers.”⁴ In 1970, Marley founded the Tuff Gong label.

Marley’s early reggae recordings were collaborations with producer Lee “Scratch” Perry from 1969–1972. On August 25, 1972, the Wailers signed an agreement with producer Chris Blackwell’s Island Records in London, commencing the final phase of Marley’s career that brought reggae music to a global audience. The reggae genre retained the slower tempo of rock steady and restored the consistent offbeat accents of ska. A good example is Marley’s revised version of “One Love,” released on the *Exodus* album in 1977, where the tempo is seventy-six BPM (versus 120 BPM of the 1965 ska version).

More than a style, reggae was about substance. In an interview given to promote the *Survival* album, released October 2, 1979, Marley defined the Wailers’ reggae as “a vehicle that is used to translate a message of redemption to the people upon earth today.”⁵ Furthermore, in his song “One Drop” from the *Survival* album, Marley positions the Wailers’ music as a method of “resisting against the system.”⁶ Marley’s music serves a dual purpose: resistance and redemption. Below, I will discuss the meaning of these terms, and how the Bible relates to the twin stranded goal of resistance and redemption. As this work makes clear, the Bible is instrumental to Marley’s music, message, and mission.

3. White, *Catch a Fire*, 463–68.

4. *Ibid.*, 481.

5. Henke, “Marley Speaks,” 18.

6. Marley, “One Drop,” released on *Survival*.

The Bible and the Guitar

Marley said that his songwriting process began with his acoustic guitar, and that the words and music would “grow together,”⁷ and “just happen.”⁸ He described the process as “Jah inspiration come through man.”⁹ Beginning in 1974, the Wailers’ art director Neville Garrick often served as Marley’s amanuensis, scribing the lyrics as Marley would “feel it around till he found the right thing.”¹⁰ No mention is made of Marley consulting the Bible while he wrote his music, but Garrick calls Marley’s songs “the true, new psalms.”¹¹ Garrick’s insight may apply to the content of the lyrics as well as their effect on the reader or listener. As the Israelite experience is documented in songs called Psalms in scripture, so the pan-African experience is enshrined in Marley’s scripturally influenced songs. And as there are many who find comfort and solace in reading, hearing, or singing Psalms, so too there are many who experience such effect from Marley’s music. Garrick’s comment also hints that the biblical references in Marley’s lyrics arose naturally as a key component of his music and message. Garrick states that Marley “never struggled to write a song”¹² and likens Marley to King David in his “gift lyrically to deliver God’s message.”¹³

The Bible and the guitar were reciprocally essential to Marley’s musical message that he spread throughout the world via relentless touring. Mick Carter, the Wailers’ tour promoter from 1973 to 1980, recalls that on the bus during their first UK tour in 1973, “The Bibles would come out and the arguments would become very heated.”¹⁴ Music journalist and Marley biographer Stephen Davis states that during the 1975 Wailers tour, “Bob would often consult and quote from the weathered Bible he carried with him . . . His personal Bible was a Jamaican printing of the King James version, with a photocopied portrait of the Lion of Judah in full regalia pasted on the cover, as well as other pictures of Selassie glued on the inside cover

7. Henke, “Marley Speaks,” 9.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

10. Quoted in Goldman, *Exodus*, 127. See also 95 and 228.

11. Quoted in Steffens, “Rasta Warrior,” 253. See also “State Funeral,” *Caribbean Nights*, dir. Mendell and Chabot, where Garrick compares Marley’s lyrics with “the Psalms of King David in the Bible.”

12. “State Funeral,” *Caribbean Nights*, dir. Mendell and Chabot.

13. Ibid.

14. Quoted in Boot and Salewicz, *Songs of Freedom*, 115.

The Bible and Bob Marley

and flyleaf.”¹⁵ Vivien Goldman, who toured with the Wailers in 1977 while covering the group for music magazines, observes that

Bob never went anywhere without his old King James Bible. Personalized with photos of Haile Selassie, it would lie open beside him, a ribbon marking the place, as he played his guitar by candlelight in whichever city he found himself. He had a way of isolating himself with the book, withdrawing from the other laughing musicians on the tour bus to ponder a particular passage, then challenging his bred’ren to debate it as vigorously as if they were playing soccer.¹⁶

These anecdotes indicate Marley’s active engagement with scripture, one of close reading, interpretation, and debate. Further, the fact that Marley “personalized” his Bible with images of Selassie suggests a serious reading and appropriation of scripture, a reading through the lens of Selassie’s role and the pan-African experience.

Marley’s intense interest in scripture raises interesting questions. Did his interpretation draw parallels between the Israelite experience recorded in the Bible and the pan-African experience? Why did Marley’s interpretive process involve reaching an international audience? Did his biblical interpretation yield something of value to all, “without regard to race?”¹⁷ What is the significance of some modern musicians’ engagement with Christianity and/or specifically the Bible? Others have analyzed religion in Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and U2.¹⁸ It would seem that an equally serious study of Marley is warranted. Yet, little scholarly attention has been paid to Marley’s biblical interests. Joe Jurgensen documents over 400 books in *Bob Marley: The Complete Annotated Bibliography*, not a single one devoted to the Bible.

THE ENIGMA OF BOB MARLEY

Bob Marley is in many ways an enigma whom fans, critics, and scholars from various disciplines are still trying to figure out. He was a national hero in Jamaica, having been awarded the Order of Merit, the nation’s

15. Davis, *Bob Marley*, 144–45.

16. Goldman, *Exodus*, 13–14.

17. Marley, “War” (credited to Cole and Barrett), released on *Rastaman Vibration*; words taken from Haile Selassie’s 1963 address to the United Nations.

18. See Gilmour, *Dylan and Scripture*; Turner, *Gospel According to Beatles*; and Whiteley and Maynard, eds., *Preaching U2*.

Introduction

third highest honor, in April 1981,¹⁹ and a hero to the Third World, who was thus awarded the UN Peace Medal from the African nations in June 1978.²⁰ Davis writes that after Marley's cancer diagnosis in 1977, the press described him "variously as 'reggae's shining prince,' 'revolutionary artist,' 'a superstar of contemporary music,' 'modern prophet,' 'first Third World superstar,' 'most important cultural figure of the seventies,' 'a righteous campaigner for truth and justice' and—perhaps best—the psalmist of Jamaican reggae."²¹ Notably, Leonard Barrett, who conducted field studies of the Rastafari movement in the 1960s and early 1970s, called Marley "the Charles Wesley" (Methodist leader and hymnist) of Rastafari.²²

Reggae historian Roger Steffens states that Marley's legacy can be best appreciated when considering the accolades he received at the turn of the millennium: "*The New York Times* called Bob 'the most influential artist of the second half of the 20th century.' His song 'One Love,' was chosen as the anthem of the millennium by the BBC. Perhaps the most important honor though, and most unexpected honor, came from *Time Magazine* which chose *Exodus* as the best album of the 20th century."²³ More recently, scholars have labeled Marley a "biracial black culture hero,"²⁴ "lyrical genius,"²⁵ and "herald of a postcolonial world."²⁶ These titles and others indicate that Marley is a transcendent figure who defies easy categorization. But, as I have indicated, one of the most important aspects of Marley's life and music has not been the subject of serious analysis, *despite* the obvious importance to the artist himself: the Bible! In order to place his biblical thought in context, one must consider how Marley transcends the dualities of city/country, black/white, Christian/Rasta, and secular/sacred.

19. White, *Catch a Fire*, 27.

20. Steffens, "Rasta Warrior," 260.

21. Davis, *Bob Marley*, 192.

22. Barrett, *Rastafarians*, 210, 213.

23. "Guitar as a Weapon," *Rebel Music*, dir. Marre.

24. Stephens, "Bob Marley's Zion," 149.

25. Dawes, *Lyrical Genius*.

26. Toynbee, *Herald*, 6.

The Bible and Bob Marley

Country/City

Marley was born on February 6, 1945, in the village of Nine Mile, St. Ann Parish, Jamaica.²⁷ His rural origin is an integral part of Marley the man and the artist. Blackwell states, “What really contributed to Bob being who he was, was the fact that he grew up in the country. That he used to farm and that he had that sort of innate intelligence that you have to put in to take out.”²⁸ Kwame Dawes states that “to understand Marley’s work, we must . . . appreciate that Marley was a product of Jamaica—of rural Jamaica that was, and still is, a place steeped in mysticism and a sensitivity to spiritual matters that is wholly African.”²⁹ As important as this rural aspect is to Marley’s music, one must also consider the role of the city.

In 1957, Marley’s mother Cedella moved to the capital city of Kingston with twelve-year-old Bob. Like most youths of the time, Marley finished school at fifteen.³⁰ He recorded his first song, “Judge Not,” in February 1962.³¹ That same year, Jamaica gained independence from the UK on August 6, and Marley’s mother immigrated to the US in the winter.³² When the aunt with whom his mother had left him moved back to Nine Mile, Marley opted to remain in the city to pursue music. In 1963, Marley was eighteen years old and homeless in the Trench Town ghetto of Kingston,³³ an experience that would have a lasting impact on his songwriting (see “So Jah Seh” in Chapter 3).

In February 1966, Marley made his first trip to his mother’s new home in Wilmington, Delaware, in order to raise money to start his own record label.³⁴ He stayed there until October, sweeping floors at the Hotel du Pont.³⁵ On a later trip he worked at a Chrysler plant, an experience immortalized in his song, “Night Shift.”³⁶ Marley was not yet a Rasta, and he missed a seminal event in Rastafari history, the visit of Ethiopian Emperor

27. The village is often colloquially called “Nine Miles.”

28. “The Music Industry,” *Rebel Music*, dir. Marre.

29. Dawes, *Lyrical Genius*, 27.

30. White, *Catch a Fire*, 128; Steffens, “Rasta Warrior,” 255.

31. Steffens and Pierson, *Discography*, 1. By some accounts the song was recorded in 1961.

32. Booker, *My Son*, 89.

33. Davis, *Bob Marley*, 36; Salewicz, *Untold Story*, 61.

34. “American Influences,” *Rebel Music*, dir. Marre.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

Introduction

Haile Selassie I to Jamaica on April 21, 1966. However, he did witness significant events in America that would influence his thought: the civil rights and black power movements. Steffens states that Marley “was exposed to the civil uprisings in America. He saw things firsthand where he lived. He saw the television reports every night of the brutality going on around the United States and that had a profound influence on the kind of writing he did.”³⁷ Black power influence is evident in Marley’s song “Black Progress” from late 1969 or early 1970, which incorporates James Brown’s “(Say it Loud) I’m Black and I’m Proud.”³⁸ Early hints at theological reflections on Marley’s experience in America are evident in his song, “Night Shift,” when he sings, “By the sweat of my brow / Eat your bread!”³⁹ The implication is that others are eating by the sweat of Marley’s brow, contrary to Genesis 3:19, where Adam is charged with eating by the sweat of his own brow. Through a subtle change in scriptural words, Marley evokes exploitation and the worker not enjoying the fruits of his labors.

Black/White

Marley claimed pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey and Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie as his two biggest influences.⁴⁰ One of Marley’s most memorable lyrics is a quotation from Garvey, “Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery / None but ourselves can free our minds,”⁴¹ and the entire lyrics of “War” are taken from Selassie’s 1963 UN Address, which speaks of a day when “the philosophy which holds one race superior and another inferior is finally and permanently discredited and abandoned.”⁴² Marley held the message of racial reconciliation dear to his heart and regarded the words as “prophecy.”⁴³ Marley, who never knew his white father, may have seen himself as an embodiment of black and white reconciliation: “Well,

37. Ibid.

38. Steffens and Pierson, *Discography*, 36.

39. Marley, “Night Shift,” released on *Rastaman Vibration*.

40. Noble, “Interview.”

41. Marley, “Redemption Song,” released on *Uprising*. Garvey stated, “We are going to emancipate ourselves from mental slavery because whilst others might free the body, none but ourselves can free the mind,” in a speech given in 1937 and published the following year. See Garvey, “Work,” 791.

42. Selassie, “Address.”

43. “War,” *Time Will Tell*, dir. Lowney.

The Bible and Bob Marley

me don't dip on nobody's side, me don't dip on the black man's side not the white man's side, me dip on God's side . . . who cause me to come from black and white, who give me this talent."⁴⁴ Though he spoke out against oppression, he did not label it with a color. He claimed to be against "black and white oppressors . . . all oppressors,"⁴⁵ and continued by stating, "You know, I deal with human being, I deal with purpose, why God created man in the first place."⁴⁶ This emphasis on Genesis and the oneness of creation allows Marley's theology to exhibit what J. Richard Middleton calls a "radical forgiveness."⁴⁷ Thus, in his song "One Love," Marley urges the reconciliation of all people, even "the hopeless sinner,"⁴⁸ by calling upon creation "[a]s it was in the beginning."⁴⁹

Christian/Rasta

"The church figured greatly in [Marley's] early childhood," writes Steffens, "Sundays would find him singing hymns such as 'Precious Lord, Take My Hand' and 'Let the Lord Be Seen in You.'"⁵⁰ Gospel influence would turn up later in Marley's music: "I am Going Home" from 1964 contains the first and last verses of "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," and "One Love" uses lines from Curtis Mayfield's gospel influenced song, "People Get Ready." David Moskovitz states that Marley's mother raised him "just as she had been raised, as a conservative Catholic."⁵¹ Moskovitz does not list his source for this information and it is patently incorrect. In fact, Cedella Marley Booker claims to have "caught religion . . . at the Shiloh Apostolic church,"⁵² an affiliate of the Pentecostal Church, and that her "conversion"⁵³ was prior to conceiving Bob,

44. McCann, *Bob Marley*, 54. The phrases "me don't dip on" and "me dip on" in McCann's transcript are likely mistransliterations of the patois "me no deh pon" and "me deh pon," meaning "I'm not there upon" and "I'm there upon" respectively. The audio of Marley's statement can be heard in "Coming In From The Cold," *Time Will Tell*, dir. Lowney.

45. "Politics," *Rebel Music*, dir. Marre.

46. Ibid.

47. Middleton, "Identity and Subversion," 192.

48. Marley, "One Love," released on *Exodus*.

49. Ibid.

50. Steffens, "Rasta Warrior," 254.

51. Moskovitz, *Words and Music*, 16.

52. Booker, *My Son*, 23. See also White, *Catch a Fire*, 97; Davis, *Bob Marley*, 12.

53. Booker, *My Son*, 23.

Introduction

who was born Nesta Robert Marley. She writes that in 1966, “during Nesta’s stay with me in Delaware, we discussed religion. I was, and had been from girlhood days, a faithful follower of the Pentecostal Church.”⁵⁴

It is generally agreed that Marley began his immersion into Rastafari after returning from his trip to Delaware in late 1966.⁵⁵ White states that Marley attended his first Rasta “grounation” (also “groundation,” a Rastafari convention such as the annual commemoration of Selassie’s visit to Jamaica) on April 21, 1968.⁵⁶ Marley’s first Rastafari inspired recording, “Selassie is the Chapel,” was made on June 8, 1968, and was not released commercially.⁵⁷ Marley’s first apparent attempt at a commercial release with an explicit reference to Rastafari is “Jah is Mighty,” recorded in 1970. It was pressed as a white label single to gauge reaction in the record shops but apparently did not make it to a full commercial pressing.⁵⁸ During the same studio session, Marley recorded a more secular version of the song entitled “Corner Stone” that was released on the *Soul Rebels* album.⁵⁹

On November 4, 1980, Marley converted to Ethiopian Orthodox Christianity.⁶⁰ Archbishop Yesehaq, who baptized Marley, stated, “He had a desire to be baptised long ago, but there were people close to him who controlled him and who were aligned to a different aspect of Rastafari . . . Many people think he was baptised because he knew he was dying, but that is not so . . . he did it when there was no more pressure on him.”⁶¹ Marley paramour Cindy Breakspere recounts the pressure Marley faced toward the end of his life: “I think he just worked harder and harder and harder . . . He was on tour more and more nearing the end of his life, in the studio more, just in demand so much more . . . I don’t know how one person would have taken any more pressure.”⁶² Aside from career pressure,

54. *Ibid.*, 105.

55. “American Influences,” *Rebel Music*, dir. Marre; White, *Catch a Fire*, 224; Davis, *Bob Marley*, 68; Goldman, *Exodus*, 43. Rastas do not speak of “conversion,” but of the realization of the divinity that is already within oneself from creation (cf. Gen 1:26–27). Thus Marley speaks of being a Rasta “from creation” and “from the beginning to the end.” See “Opening Interview,” *Caribbean Nights*, dir. Mendell and Chabot.

56. White, *Catch a Fire*, 255.

57. Steffens and Pierson, *Discography*, 34.

58. McCann and Hawke, *Complete Guide*, 128.

59. Steffens and Pierson, *Discography*, 46.

60. White, *Catch a Fire*, 310; Davis, *Bob Marley*, 240.

61. Quoted in van Dijk, *Jahmaica*, 282.

62. “World Marley,” *Rebel Music*, dir. Marre.

The Bible and Bob Marley

Marley indubitably felt the pressure of what had become his leadership role in Rastafari.⁶³ Cultural anthropologist and Rastafari scholar Frank Jan van Dijk believes the attempted control over Marley mentioned by Yesehaq came from the Twelve Tribes of Israel, the Rastafari group with which Marley was affiliated since the mid-1970s. Van Dijk states, “Many Rastafarians especially members of the Twelve Tribes, regarded his baptism as a betrayal of Rastafari.”⁶⁴ Marley’s conversion is still seldom discussed. For example, in his literary study of Marley’s lyrics, Dawes states, “Marley would die a Rastaman, fully committed to Haile Selassie and to his faith.”⁶⁵ Theologian William Spencer speculates that Rastafari, still in its infancy as a religion, may grow into a “Selassian”⁶⁶ Christian renewal, following Haile Selassie (whose name means “Power of the Trinity”) into the Ethiopian Orthodox Church of which he was an ardent member, as Marley did when he was baptized as Berhane Selassie (“Light of the Trinity”).

The misconceptions over Marley’s spiritual development are indicative of a broader misunderstanding that includes the lack of any prolonged attention to the centrality of the Bible for Marley as a man, musician, and one who saw himself on a divinely inspired mission. In the most recent documentary film of Marley, officially sanctioned by his family and deemed “definitive,”⁶⁷ only one mention is made of Bible reading.⁶⁸ However, the film does raise significant issues that have a direct bearing on Marley’s spirituality. For example, director Kevin MacDonald makes clear the point that Marley felt rejected by both black and white segments of his family. The latter in particular inspired his song “Corner Stone,” as recounted by Marley’s friend and manager Allan “Skill” Cole.⁶⁹ But a major point is missed: Marley’s lyric, “The stone that the builder refused / Will always be the head corner stone,”⁷⁰ is a direct quotation from Psalm 118! Marley turned to the

63. Barrett (*Rastafarians*, 213), van Dijk, (*Jahmaica*, 24), and others have cited the importance of Marley to the global spread and acceptance of Rastafari.

64. Van Dijk, *Jahmaica*, 282.

65. Dawes, *Lyrical Genius*, 20.

66. Spencer, *Dread Jesus*, 161.

67. Magnolia Pictures website for the film, *Marley*, <http://www.magpictures.com/marley/>.

68. In this one instance, Cindy Breakspeare recounts that she and Rita Marley read passages from Job while Marley’s locks, largely fallen out due to chemotherapy, were ceremoniously and poignantly removed. (*Marley*, dir. MacDonald.)

69. *Ibid.*

70. Marley, “Corner Stone,” released on *Soul Rebels*.

Introduction

Bible when confronted with adversity and rejection, and found in its pages elements of his own experience. Marley saw himself in Psalm 118. Moreover, the fact that Marley recorded a more religious version of “Corner Stone” entitled “Jah Is Mighty” during the same studio session indicates that he turned too to God, to Jah, another point missed by the movie.⁷¹ That the Psalm quotation appears in both versions evinces Marley’s blurring the distinction between religious and secular, and the indispensability of the Bible for Marley.

Secular/Sacred

The boundary between sacred and secular is particularly porous in the music of the African Diaspora such as spirituals, blues, and reggae. In discussing “the theology of the spirituals,” James Cone states that “Africans viewed life as a *whole* and did not make the distinctions between the ‘secular’ and the ‘sacred’ that are found in Western culture.”⁷² Similarly, Dawes states, “Marley’s treatment of spiritual matters as elemental to everyday life—as part of reality—emerged out of the culture in which he lived. The divide between the secular and the spiritual was a Western preoccupation that had not permeated working-class Jamaican society.”⁷³ The blurring of the secular/sacred line is evident in the fact that Marley adapted traditional Rasta hymns for commercial release; for example, the entirety of the song “Rasta Man Chant,”⁷⁴ and the bridge section of the song “Exodus,”⁷⁵ which quotes a hymn documented in the first sociological study of Rastafari from 1953:

He (Haile Selassie) comes to break up oppression
To set the captives free
To take away transgression
And rule by equality⁷⁶

71. Bunny Wailer, the last surviving member of the original Wailers triumvirate, is displeased with the film’s failure to adequately address Marley’s spiritual life. See Johnson, “Wailer Unhappy.”

72. Cone, *Spirituals*, 38–39. Emphasis original.

73. Dawes, *Lyrical Genius*, 28.

74. Released on *Burnin’*.

75. Released on *Exodus*.

76. Simpson, “Political Cultism,” 142.

The Bible and Bob Marley

Marley's song "One Love" has found its way into Anglican Church hymnals in Jamaica⁷⁷ and into commercials for the Jamaican Tourist Board,⁷⁸ transcending the secular/sacred barrier. But why was the Bible so central to Marley the Jamaican man? To gain a sense of the importance of this question, one must consider the context of twentieth-century Jamaica.

BOB MARLEY AND THE BIBLE

The Bible is the most commonly quoted book in Jamaica. Jamaican sociologist of religion Ennis Edmonds explains, "In the first half of the twentieth century, an education to which Afro-Jamaicans had access tended to come via the church. As a corollary, the education was rooted in the Bible, so much so that the only book with which the masses of Jamaicans were acquainted was the Bible. This resulted in a kind of 'biblicism' in which the Bible became the source of authority in all discussions and disputations."⁷⁹ Nathaniel Murrell states that "the Bible does not only provide a basis for religious faith and practice, it is also an essential part of public education and political discourse . . . No other book holds the distinction of having such a mythic character and powerful grip on people."⁸⁰ Yet Marley is perhaps a unique case study in the Jamaican Bible obsession. Music journalist and Marley biographer Chris Salewicz writes that in 1957, when Marley was twelve, his school teacher noted an "interest in reading—as long as it was linked to his copious knowledge of the Bible."⁸¹ Salewicz states that in the years leading up to the 1963 recording of "Simmer Down," the Wailers' first ska hit, "Bob's bible had rarely been out of his sight."⁸² Biblical references and imagery pervade Marley's music, from "Judge Not," his first published song at age seventeen (based on Matthew 7:1/Luke 6:37), to "Redemption

77. See "Reggae Songs in Anglican Hymnal," *New York Times*, August 7, 2007, Arts section, Late edition (East coast). "One Love" has also been adopted for Catholic liturgical use in the Caribbean; see Guadeloupe, *Chanting Down*, 95. From what I am told, it is also used in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

78. Cooper, *Sound Clash*, 190.

79. Quoted in Murrell, "Dangerous Memories," 10.

80. *Ibid.*, 10.

81. Boot and Salewicz, *Songs of Freedom*, 44.

82. *Ibid.*, 67. Note that while most sources agree that "Simmer Down" was recorded in late 1963 and reached number one on the Jamaican charts in February 1964 (e.g., White, *Catch a Fire*, 157–59), Steffens and Pierson list a recording date of July 6, 1964 (*Discography*, 1).

Introduction

Song,” the last track of his final album before he died of cancer at age thirty-six (“How long shall they kill our prophets while we stand aside and look? / Some say it’s just a part of it, we’ve got to fulfill the book,”⁸³ cf. Matt 23:37/ Luke 13:34). He even said the name of his group derives from the “weeping and wailing”⁸⁴ found in the Bible, likely referring to Jeremiah 9:10, a lament over the Babylonian conquest of Judah. He read daily from the King James Version⁸⁵ and was a member of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, known to be the most “Christian” and Bible-based sect of Rastafari.⁸⁶ He began concerts by reciting Bible passages, for example, Psalm 87 at a 1979 concert in California.⁸⁷ In interviews and conversations he would refer to the Bible and biblical themes. For example, in June 1975, he said, “Me not of the world, y’know. Me live in the world but I’m not of the world”⁸⁸ (cf. John 15:19; 17:14, 16). Significantly, the world from which Marley distanced himself was the world of the West, colonialism, and Babylon.

Context of Colonization

Tat-Siong Benny Liew has pointed out that “the various books that make up the Bible . . . were all collected and/or written in the context of colonization”⁸⁹ and that studying biblical texts alongside postcolonial texts can enhance both biblical and postcolonial criticism. Marley began his recording career the year of Jamaican Independence, qualifying him as a postcolonial artist from the temporal perspective. However, there is another qualification to postcolonial thought—the critique of colonialism, which is inherent in the Rastafari ideology that Marley embraced.

Rastafari arose in a colonial context of “economic deprivation, political disfranchisement, and cultural alienation that prevailed among

83. Marley, “Redemption Song,” released on *Uprising*. Note that Marley is inclined to refer to passages that are present in both Matthew and Luke, but absent from Mark. Scholars believe such passages are from a missing source document of Jesus’s sayings, referred to in scholarly literature as “Q.”

84. McCann, *Bob Marley*, 12.

85. Goldman, *Exodus*, 13–14.

86. Barrett, *Rastafarians*, 225–32; Murrell and Williams, “Hermeneutics,” 327.

87. See *Legend Live*, dir. Gazzanaga.

88. McCann, *Bob Marley*, 94.

89. Liew, “Postcolonial Criticism,” 221.

The Bible and Bob Marley

Afro-Jamaicans in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹⁰ Demographically, the movement from its inception through 1965 was predominantly lower class, male, age seventeen to thirty-five, of African ancestry, and ex-Christian.⁹¹ Marginalization, poverty, and racism were prime factors in the rise of the Rastafari belief system. The nascent Rasta movement looked to the crowning of Ethiopian Emperor Haile Selassie I in 1930 as a sign of redemption from their plight, which they likened to the Hebrew captivity in Babylon. The movement was born of a messianic hope in Selassie as the “King of Kings” from Revelation 19:16 and “Lion of the tribe of Judah” from Revelation 5:5, phrases used in his imperial title and motto.⁹²

Edmonds notes that, “Rastas may differ concerning many of their beliefs, including the divinity of Selassie and repatriation, but all agree on the Babylonian nature of life in the West.”⁹³ Resistance against Babylon is at the core of Rastafari theology and culture. For example, regarding his dreadlocked appearance Marley stated, “My locks are total freedom. They show the people in Babylon that this man is totally free.”⁹⁴ Opposition to Babylon is as clear-cut as good versus evil. As Marley states, “You have wrong and you have right. Wrong is what we call Babylon.”⁹⁵

For Marley, Babylon represents any oppressive or corrupt system meant to keep people from the truth, including systems of government, universities, and churches that are “[d]eceiving the people continually.”⁹⁶ The quest for freedom/redemption from Babylon is a constant throughout Marley’s career, from “Concrete Jungle,” the opening track of his first major label album (“No chains around my feet but I’m not free / I know I’m bound here in captivity”⁹⁷) to “Redemption Song.” Here it is important to note that “the word ‘redemption’ is preferred by Rastas to ‘salvation,’ since they see themselves primarily as captives of an alien people.”⁹⁸

Marley’s song title, “Concrete Jungle,” is a reference to the base of the politically left People’s National Party (PNP) in the Wailers’ Trench Town

90. Edmonds, *Rastafari*, 29.

91. Barrett, *Rastafarians*, 2–3.

92. Chisholm, “Connections,” 171–72.

93. Edmonds, *Rastafari*, 43–44.

94. McCann, *Bob Marley*, 50.

95. *Ibid.*, 48.

96. Marley, “Babylon System,” released on *Survival*.

97. Marley, “Concrete Jungle,” released on *Catch a Fire*.

98. Owens, *Dread*, 195.

Introduction

neighborhood of Kingston. Marley's formative years were spent amidst political violence between gangs affiliated with the PNP and the opposing, politically right Jamaica Labour Party (JLP), based in Tivoli Gardens on the other side of Spanish Town Road from Concrete Jungle. As discussed below in "Running Away" and "So Much Things To Say," Marley himself fell victim to such violence in the run-up to the 1976 election when he was shot and wounded in what was labeled an assassination attempt.

The two party system in Jamaica, inherited from British colonial rule and influenced by outside forces, is a case study in neocolonialism, the lingering effect of imperialism in which "many former colonies still find themselves under the indirect or informal rule of others, including but not restricted to their former colonial masters."⁹⁹ Edmonds notes, "The Rastafarian movement, with its ideology, symbolism, and lifestyle, constitutes a deliberate undertaking aimed at delegitimizing the Jamaican sociopolitical order imposed by external powers and maintained by their local cohorts."¹⁰⁰ As discussed in Chapter 4, Marley explicitly calls out one such external power, the CIA, in the song "Rat Race," at the end of verse one. At the start of verse two, Marley quotes Paul's highly apocalyptic first letter to the Thessalonians: "For when they shall say, Peace and safety; then sudden destruction cometh upon them" (1 Thess 5:3, KJV). Paul's "peace and safety" is in turn a mockery of the Roman imperial slogan, as explained in Chapter 4. Therefore, in 1 Thessalonians 5:3 and in Marley's adaptation, there is a clear juxtaposition of colonial and postcolonial political power with the sudden eschatological day of reckoning when political powers will be destroyed. Marley critiques the neocolonial system using a Bible that was written under similar circumstances—the context of colonization.

Resistance and Redemption

We are now in a position to speculate what Marley meant by advancing his music as a means toward resistance and redemption. At its most basic level, redemption is simply the opposite of Babylonian captivity—the temporal freedom that allows one to enjoy the basic right to life. Marley offered his music as a means toward temporal freedom: "We free the people with music."¹⁰¹ But his concept of redemption goes beyond the temporal to

99. Liew, "Postcolonial Criticism," 212.

100. Edmonds, *Rastafari*, 65.

101. Marley, "Trench Town," released on *Confrontation*.

The Bible and Bob Marley

the psychological and spiritual. In “Redemption Song,” he urges listeners to “[e]mancipate yourselves from mental slavery.”¹⁰² Furthermore, Marley seeks to unite people with one another and with God. Wife and backup singer Rita Marley explains, “We were on a mission. It was like an evangelist campaign to bring people closer to Jah.”¹⁰³ Ultimate redemption is achieved when Babylon falls once and for all, as foretold in the Book of Revelation. For Marley, the eschaton brings about the restoration of unity among God and humanity that was present at creation: “As it was in the beginning / So shall it be in the end.”¹⁰⁴ And while this state of “One Love” is to be restored at the eschaton, it is Marley’s conviction, like that of Saint Paul (Gal 2:20), that the profound unity of God and humanity can be experienced here and now, providing a foretaste of what is to come.

Yet how is Marley’s message of redemption related to a method of resistance? Notably, Marley found the link between resistance and redemption in the Bible. Particularly the Book of Revelation, which Richard Bauckham calls “the most powerful piece of political resistance literature from the period of the early empire,”¹⁰⁵ is a critical link between resistance and redemption for Marley. Thus, in his song “One Drop,” Marley both positions his music as a method of “resisting against the system”¹⁰⁶ and urges listeners to “read it in Revelation / You’ll find your redemption.”¹⁰⁷ The importance of Revelation can be seen in the fact that Marley alludes to it more than any other biblical book (see Appendix A, Table 1), an average of two allusions per album (see Appendix A, Table 7). Interestingly, Marley never directly quotes Revelation. He does not so much interpret the text as enact it musically. Marley said of his work, “The point is the fulfillment of Revelation.”¹⁰⁸

But a question remains: Does Marley advocate active or passive resistance against the Babylon system? Here it is important to note that resistance need not involve actual rebellion to be active. From their perspective as political scientists, Keisha Lindsay and Louis Lindsay find in Marley’s work the suggestion that revolution is not an event, but “a ‘process’ of

102. Marley, “Redemption Song,” released on *Uprising*.

103. *Marley*, dir. MacDonald.

104. Marley, “One Love,” released on *Exodus*.

105. Bauckham, *Revelation*, 38. See also Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*, 94.

106. Marley, “One Drop,” released on *Survival*.

107. *Ibid.*

108. Marley, ed., *Listen to Bob Marley*, 106.

Introduction

social transformation over time¹⁰⁹ that includes “everyday acts of popular resistance”¹¹⁰ and the gradual “re/education and re-orientation of fundamental values and belief systems.”¹¹¹ More will be said on the latter educational aspect below. Notably, the authors include the performance of music as an overt act of resistance. This observation coheres with Marley’s self image: “I see myself as a revolutionary, who don’t have no help, and I take no bribe from no one. I fight it single-handed with music.”¹¹²

Marley fights an ideological battle, to be won by a higher consciousness. He viewed the ultimate confrontation with Babylon as “the consciousness against folly; that’s the Armageddon.”¹¹³ For Marley, Armageddon is not an event, but a process already underway and ongoing in history until the eschaton. Three tracks on the posthumously released *Confrontation* album stand out as examples of the battle against Babylon. In “Chant Down Babylon,” Marley sings “Come we go chant down Babylon one more time”¹¹⁴ signifying the recurring aspect of the battle, and “We chant down Babylon with music”¹¹⁵ stating his weapon of choice. Marley called music “the biggest gun.”¹¹⁶ But tightly coupled with Marley’s music is scripture, as seen in the next song.

In “Jump Nyabinghi,” Marley remembers past victories from biblical history and states the current situation:

It remind I of the days in Jericho
When we trodding down Jericho walls
These are the days when we’ll trod through Babylon
Gonna trod until Babylon falls
Jump, jump, jump, Nyabinghi¹¹⁷

Significantly, it was sound that brought down the walls of Jericho (Josh 6:20). “Nyabinghi” is a multivalent term in Rastafari that refers to a style of drumming/music, a type of ritual gathering, and to one of the oldest orders of Rastafari. “The term itself has its origins in a fiercely anticolonial

109. Lindsay and Lindsay, “Politics of Subversion,” 77.

110. Ibid.

111. Ibid., 81.

112. “Revolution,” *Time Will Tell*, DVD.

113. Marley, ed., *Listen to Bob Marley*, 108.

114. Marley, “Chant Down Babylon,” released on *Confrontation*.

115. Ibid.

116. McCann, *Bob Marley*, 41.

117. Marley, “Jump Nyabinghi,” released on *Confrontation*.

The Bible and Bob Marley

religious movement that flourished in East and Central Africa around the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century,”¹¹⁸ notes Neil Savishinsky. The pairing of Babylon’s fall with anti-colonial resistance is not surprising—Marley consistently embeds anti-Babylonian strains of resistance into his music.

In “Rastaman Live Up!,” the last track on the album, Marley positions Rasta culture as a form of resistance:

Rastaman live up, Bongoman don’t give up
Congoman live up, Binghiman don’t give up
Keep your culture, don’t be afraid of the vulture
Grow your dreadlocks, don’t be afraid of the wolf pack¹¹⁹

Rasta culture and dreadlocks are an overt rejection of Babylon. Barry Chevannes, from his perspective as an anthropologist, calls them a form of “*symbolic* confrontation.”¹²⁰ Next, Marley recalls past victories, as he did in “Jump Nyabinghi”:

David slew Goliath with a sling and a stone
Samson slew the Philistines with a donkey jawbone¹²¹

Marley situates the current struggle in a biblical-historical framework, a continuum of resistance that lasts until the eschaton. Recall the observation above that Marley’s creation theology and eschatology are linked, as indicated in the lyrics of “One Love.” Here, Marley implies this link when he sings:

Trodding through creation, in a Irie meditation
Seen many visions, in a this yah Armageddon¹²²

The ultimate confrontation with Babylon, Armageddon, is already underway. The events of Revelation are underway. But they also point to Genesis, to the creation story and to the story of Babylon’s first fall:

So it’s in the beginning, so shall it be in this Iwah [time]
And they falling in confusion, well just a step from Babel tower¹²³

118. Savishinsky, “African Dimensions,” 141, n. 5.

119. Marley, “Rastaman Live Up!,” released on *Confrontation*.

120. Chevannes, “Exorcism of Racism,” 66. Emphasis original.

121. Marley, “Rastaman Live Up!,” released on *Confrontation*.

122. Ibid.

123. Ibid.

Introduction

Marley refers to the eschatological recreation, where the end is a new beginning. However, whereas in “One Love,” he sang, “As it was in the beginning / So shall it be in the end,”¹²⁴ here Marley sings, “so shall it be in this Iwah,” meaning *now*. Just as the Babylonians fell into confusion when their tower aspirations were shattered (Gen 11:1–9), so they currently fall into confusion in this time. Marley’s mission is being accomplished in the present tense—it is a fitting finish to Marley’s final album.

Marley’s music serves a dual purpose, to free people from and resist against Babylon. His music is on the front line of an ideological battle that includes differences over biblical interpretation. Marley is a “popular” interpreter, not one who is formally trained or authorized by any system of governance. Thus the very act of interpreting, especially over against prevailing interpretations, is itself an act of popular resistance. The focus of this work is Marley’s biblical interpretation. A recurring theme throughout will be how his interpretation relates to the two essential strands of his music: resistance and redemption.

That Marley can be appreciated not only as a great artist and songwriter but also as an interpreter of scripture is an integral part of the Bob Marley story that has not been sufficiently addressed. However, there have been important precursors to the concept of Marley as biblical interpreter. These provide a background for understanding this overlooked aspect of Marley and are briefly reviewed in the next chapter.

124. Marley, “One Love,” released on *Exodus*.