

**AGAINST MYTHICISM: A CASE FOR THE PLAUSIBILITY
OF A HISTORICAL JESUS**
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A position that appears to be growing in popularity in atheist and rationalist circles is known as 'mythicism'. According to this position we have no adequate reason to believe that the gospels refer to a historical figure called Jesus at all. This position of strong scepticism holds that the gospels are entirely mythological texts and that we are mistaken in reading them as embellished accounts of a man who lived and preached in the Middle East around 2000 years ago. I disagree with this position for a number of reasons. In particular, I contend that the apocalyptic material found on Jesus' lips and the hopes for a very real earthly historical transformation strongly suggest that there is an underlying historical basis to the claims that a man named Jesus made 'prophetic' statements about events that were expected to happen within his lifetime, and that this historical figure was considered by his band of followers to be the long awaited Messiah. The fact that hopes for eschatological transformation and claims of the coming of a Messiah are nothing more than religious mythological notions does not preclude there having been a historical figure to which these hopes were attached.

In the following article I will examine the strange and fascinating case of Haile Selassie, a figure proclaimed by followers of the Rastafari religion to be both the Messiah and the literal incarnation of God on earth. I intend to demonstrate the extent to which a real historical figure can be hugely mythologised by his devotees, indeed mythologised to such an extent that were there no non-religious records of Selassie's life, there would undoubtedly be those who would apply the same 'mythicist' arguments to the question

of his historical reality. I will argue that the case of Haile Selassie provides us with a model that seems very similar to what occurred with the mythologisation of Jesus by early Christian writers, and that, just as Selassie existed, despite all the unhistorical mythology that has been attached to him, so it is also plausible to accept the existence of a real historical Jesus beneath the mythological embellishment of his life.

In the early 20th Century, a movement developed among black people which sought to fight back against years of imperial rule and oppression of Africans and people of African descent. Ideologues such as the 'Back to Africa' black nationalist Marcus Garvey presented a vision for African regeneration in which black people would return to Africa and rule themselves, with the hope of a renaissance of African civilisation and the building of a new pan-African nation. This was a time in which followers of this movement were looking for a great leader who would come and bring these hopes to life. In a similar scenario to that of the Jews of 2000 years ago, there was a sense that the coming of a messianic figure was at hand.

On July 23, 1892, a boy named Tafari Makonnen was born in Ethiopia. This boy, who was to be given the religious name Haile Selassie ('Power of the Trinity') was raised with a wide-ranging education, taking in both Shoan Amharic traditions and Western history, languages and staccraft. At the age of 13, Selassie became *Dejazmatch* (the Ethiopian equivalent of a Count or similar nobleman) of part of Harage province, and he went on to become Ethiopia's regent from 1916 to 1930 and Emperor of Ethiopia from 1930 to 1974. Garvey 'prophesied' 'Look to Africa where a black king shall be crowned, he shall be the Redeemer' and shortly afterwards, on 2 November 1930, Selassie was crowned as Emperor in an extravagant Cathedral ceremony attended by an international audience of royals and dignitaries. As Emperor, Selassie took on the titles 'Lord of Lords', 'King of Kings' and 'Conquering Lion of the tribe of Judah', titles which were traditional for all

Ethiopian Emperors but which he reportedly 'gloried in'. Selassie had pretensions of being a direct living descendant of the Biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba but was nonetheless an ostensibly devout Orthodox Christian who made no further claims to spiritual power or authority.

As Emperor, Selassie was a modernizer and a reformer, but these reforms largely benefited Ethiopia's land-owning classes and outside his circle of admirers and devotees Selassie is widely regarded as a 'feudal autocrat' and 'a tyrant who enslaved the peasants' of Ethiopia. In 2000, Ethiopia's government stated that 'Selassie's reign was marked by its brutality and extreme oppression of the Ethiopian peasants' and spoke of its continuing efforts to trace millions he is believed to have deposited in foreign bank accounts. Selassie 'ruled over a system that created a small class of wealthy landowners but kept most subjects in abject poverty' and during a famine towards the end of his reign that killed hundreds of thousands 'his moral authority was undermined by images of him feeding his pets prime meat while his people starved'.

Selassie's reign was cut short when Marxist revolutionaries deposed him, placing him under house arrest. He died in mysterious circumstances and many believe he was murdered by his captors. Certainly, his remains were contemptuously and unceremoniously buried beneath a toilet. On November 5, 2000 his bones were finally moved to a tomb in Addis Ababa's Trinity Cathedral, in an Imperial ceremony presided over by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, although shunned by the Ethiopian government for the reasons stated above.

This very brief overview of Selassie's life demonstrates a very human ruler, someone who was clearly a fallible character, a man who fell prey to human weaknesses such as decadence, delusions of grandeur, and the desire to subjugate those over whom he had authority. None of this is particularly shocking or unexpected, given the context. For the followers of the Rastafari religion, however, Selassie is a

figure of devotion whose hagiography bears almost no relation to the historical figure, and even within his own lifetime Selassie was hailed by thousands as living incarnation of God. Indeed, for Rastafarians, Selassie was 'the Almighty on earth in the flesh of Man', 'the head of creation', 'the God of all ages', 'immortal', 'omnipotent', and 'the world's greatest political leader of the twentieth century' whose 'works for the unification of humankind, equal rights and justice are unparalleled'.

Under the influence of Garvey, many black nationalists in Ethiopia and beyond concluded that Selassie was the awaited African Messiah, the man who had been sent by God to save the black race and lead it into a new era of greatness in the 'promised land' of Ethiopia. For Rastafarians, the coming of Selassie is prefigured in Old Testament prophetic texts and amongst the proofs of his messianic and divine status are various miracle stories and tales of Selassie's unparalleled wisdom. First, there are signs in 'the heavens', as we see in Rastafarian accounts of Selassie's birth and youth. In a typical Rastafarian narrative we read:

His birth had been foretold by astrologers and chaplains. They reasoned that the planets of Neptune and Pluto, would intersect in July 1892 having started moving towards each other 493 years earlier in 1399. This would in turn influence the constellation Leo, that is the house of Judah. They also foretold the great drought that started in 1889 and was broken at the moment of the child's birth thus confirming his identity and destiny.

On the fortieth day of His life He was baptised according to custom and given the name HAILE SELASSIE which means POWER OF THE TRINITY. At the moment of baptism He became totally aware and although this knowledge faded at the time, it returned as He grew. His teachers were astounded

at the depth of his knowledge and standing (understanding) of ancient religious texts. He could also converse with animals; and savage beasts became docile in His presence.

Another account states that:

At an early age, He displayed an exceptional understanding of Ethiopia's ancient religious texts. In addition, it has been said that he could speak to the animals; He would be seen in the presence of leopards and lions. In His presence, these ferocious beasts were tamed.

And here is a more detailed account, including a miracle story:

The world should know that he is the Almighty, it is prophesied, the prophecy has been fulfilled, open your eyes and look. Haile Selassie from his youth, was a mysterious person who was said to have been feared by priest and other persons working in the palace ... Their is a story about Haile Selassie in his youth, his father & mother was astounded by his vast knowledge and wisdom of and from the bible. They brought in priest to talk with him to ask him where he knew all these things from, Haile Selassie knew books that aren't printed in the bible, like the 8th, 9th & 10th books of Moses, the Dead Sea Scrolls, he would know line for line. The priests would ask him questions and he would call them to tell them the answer in their ears and the answers he would give would frighten the priests away, and some would never return to see him. At one time their were two priests talking to Tafari, who had claimed he talks to animals and the wild beasts in the jungles of Ethiopia. One of the priests asked Tafari to draw one of these animals, so Tafari

requested for crayons and a piece of paper and began to draw it formed into a dove of bright multi-colors and before the priest could question Tafari about the bird on the page he was dumbfounded when he saw it arise off the paper and fly through the window, the two priests hysterically left the palace and never returned.

So, in Rastafarian accounts of the coming of Selassie we find the notions that planetary phenomena indicated the coming of a divine figure, that at the moment of Selassie's birth a drought miraculously ended, that the young Selassie astonished religious leaders with his wisdom, that the child could converse with dangerous animals, and even that he was able to make a drawing of a bird come to life. There are obvious parallels here with the Jesus story, in which we find a star leading 'wise men' (most likely astrologers) to seek out the newly born Messiah, and a child who stunned religious leaders with his understanding (Luke 2: 41–52). The story of the drawing of a bird coming to life also has interesting parallels. In an early (2nd or 3rd century CE) non-canonical account of Jesus' youth, 'The Infancy Gospel of Thomas', we find a tale of Jesus making clay birds which he then brings to life, and this story is also repeated in the Qur'an.

For Rastafarians, many aspects of Selassie's life are found in Biblical 'prophecy'. So, for example, we find this interpretation of the story of a drought ending upon the birth of Selassie:

The birth of 'Tafari' gave back to the land Ethiopia the Divine Blessing as in Genesis 1 v1, 'In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth.' as in Genesis 1 v2, '...and darkness was upon the face of the water.' The birth of 'Tafari' on that stormy night in the year of St. John 16th Hamle 1885 (23rd July 1892) represents the fulfillment of Genesis 1 v2. Lighting and Thunder with Flooding, the Spirit

(Tafari) of God moved upon the water. A good 'Omen' to Ethiopia.

Further Biblical associations are given with regard to Garvey's 'prophecy' of the coming of a great African king and 'Redeemer' and for some he is seen as a 'mighty Prophet' and 'greater John the Baptist'. Likewise, the ceremony in which Selassie was made Emperor is seen to involve the literal presence on earth of the Biblical Samuel:

The Ancient Rites of Anointment performed by Abuna Kripos (The Prophet Samuel returned) 2nd November 1930 on the person of Rastafari. Transfigured the person to the Eternal Godhead Haile Selassie I 'Might of the Trinity'; The Christ; The Messiah; 'The Anointed One', who has returned to reign as The Lion of the Tribe of Judah; The Root and offspring of King David', fulfilling Revelation 5 v5.

Selassie's resistance to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia and his subsequent European exile is reported to have been attended by miracles and to have been prophesied in the Old Testament. According to one tale, 'While they were launching their bombs at Ethiopia one fell directly by King Selassie's foot, the King put his foot upon the bomb and said, 'This bomb will not go off in my country', and it never did to this day'. And of the exile we read:

Haile Selassie I, 1936 leaving Ethiopia for Europe and Geneva, and the League of Nations, fulfilled this prophecy of Isaiah, when the King prophecy against the democracy of Europe and predicted the 2nd World War. This fulfillment established Emperor Haile Selassie I as the Prophet.

On April 21, 1966, Selassie conducted a State visit to Jamaica, an event that has entered the Rastafari calendar of holy days as 'Groundation Day'. Selassie's arrival in

Jamaica was met with an extraordinary outpouring of religious devotion. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Jamaican Rastafarians had never seen Selassie before, his cult had spread widely among the population, who fervently believed him to be the prophesied black Messiah and incarnation of God. A report from the Jamaican newspaper *The Jamaica Gleaner* recalls the events of the day, when a crowd of 100,000 gathered to greet their God:

The heat that rose from the tarmac of Kingston's Norman Manley International Airport was nothing compared to the level of expectation that was seeping through the thousands gathered on the tarmac that 21st day of April, 1966. The day was declared a public holiday in honour of the Emperor and people had started arriving from Wednesday night from places near and far, to form the largest crowd to have ever assembled at the Norman Manley International Airport. They came to the airport any way they could by car, by truck, by bus, by bicycle, by foot. Drum beats and chants were heard almost non-stop, providing an almost hypnotic rhythm. The smell of ganja wafted through the air completing a welcome unprecedented in size and expectation for the Emperor on his first state visit to Jamaica.

Brother George Huggins of Accompong, explained the enthusiastic welcome, 'it is hard to put in words what seeing this man, this great man, the Lord of lords, in Jamaica meant to us in the Rastafarian community. We had heard so much about him for so long.' On the tarmac, some waved palm leaves, some red, green and gold Ethiopian flags, and some blew the Maroon cowhorn known as the abeng in welcome. Everyone kept their eyes on the sky wondering when the plane carrying His Imperial Majesty from Trinidad and Tobago would arrive. Rain began

to fall and the crowd continued to wait, hoping even for just a glimpse of the plane through the thick clouds that had formed.

When the insignia of a roaring lion and stripes of red, green and gold finally came into view, the rain stopped. People shouted, 'See how God stop de rain'. The sound from the crowd was deafening as masses of people rushed to get closer to the island's distinguished visitor. The crowd simply broke down any barriers that stood in their way in their eagerness to position themselves as close as possible to the 'King of Kings'.

Today, the date of this visit continues to be commemorated by Rastafarians, who mark 'Groundation Day' with music, chanting, and prayer. As with many other events in Selassie's life, Rastafarians report miraculous phenomena on that day. For devotees, the ending of rainfall and the emergence of sunshine that occurred as Selassie's aeroplane arrived is seen as another nature miracle ('See how God stop de rain') and there are reports of the presence of doves in the sky and the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy:

On Thursday the 21st of April, at the arrival of our Divine Majesty, there was great signs and wonders in the Heavens. At his arrival the firmament became dark, the sun withdrew its shining and there came out of the Heavens thunder, storms, hails of lightning and great rain appeared in the Heavens; this all happened in a moment; it was a moment of inclement weather. There appeared in the Heavens a flock of white doves, followed by the appearance of the sun in all brightness with the arrival of a plane which landed at the Palisades Airport.

At that hour the weather became serene as before. There were raised up great shouts of jubilation,

because the King of Zion had come. Here Psalms 18 is fulfilled, 'He Bowed the Heavens and came down and darkness was under his feet, and he rode upon a cherub and did fly upon the wings of the wind. He made darkness his secret place; His pavilion round about him were dark waters and thick clouds of the skies. At the brightness that was before Him his thick clouds passed, hall stones and coals of fire.'

The Jamaica visit also led to the conversion of the wife of reggae star Bob Marley, Rita, to the Rastafari religion, after she claimed to see the mark of the stigmata on Selassie's hand as he greeted the crowd. For her, this 'miracle' was proof that Selassie was indeed the promised Messiah and the incarnation of God.

The hysterical devotion that greeted Selassie in Jamaica was surprising, even disturbing, and he refused to leave the plane for 45 minutes until his safety could be assured. Selassie did not consider himself to be the Messiah nor to be divine. He was a Christian and there are reports that officials turned Rastafarians away from his palace gates for fear of upsetting his religious sensibilities. These facts have had no effect on Rastafarian belief and even Selassie's death has done nothing to dampen their convictions that he is God and the saviour of Africa. In what is perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the Rastafari belief system, most Rastafarians refuse to accept that Selassie died at all.

In the initial period after Selassie's death and the throwing of his body into an unmarked pit, Rastafarians maintained that either Selassie was still alive and hidden from view, taking shelter in some undisclosed location from where he would eventually emerge and lead Ethiopia to salvation, or that he had ascended bodily into heaven and would soon return to re-establish his rule on earth. The subsequent discovery of Selassie's bones and their reinterment has done nothing to disabuse Rastafarians of these notions. The answer is simple: the bones were not his and

he is still alive. Just as news of Selassie's death in 1975 was presented by Rastafarians as 'a trick of the white media to undermine their faith', the same is said of his bones. While some Rastafarians attended Selassie's funeral in 2000, they were simply there to observe the proceedings and were unconvinced.

A Sudanese Rastafarian who had settled in Ethiopia told the BBC: 'Haile Selassie is King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and the conquering lion of the Tribe of Judah. He is everything to us Rastafarians and we will never accept that he is dead'. A Rastafarian leader from Trinidad and Tobago claimed: 'We do not believe that he is dead. We communicate with him in spirit daily. Haile Selassie is very much alive'. Rita Marley agreed: 'Rasta people will be all loving his Imperial Majesty, Emperor Haile Selassie I. There is no end of his reign'.

Looking at the status of Haile Selassie in the Rastafari religion we find the following:

- The coming to earth of a messianic figure who was prophesied in the Old Testament
- A birth accompanied by miracles
- A child with immense divinely given wisdom who possessed miraculous powers
- A Messiah whose actions were prefigured in Old Testament writings
- A man who could perform miracles and in whose presence miracles occurred
- A man who was worshipped and held to be divine by thousands who had not even met him
- A man who was the incarnation of God and who continues to live on despite evidence of his death
- A man who is prayed to and communicated with by his followers
- A saviour who will one day return to gather up a chosen people who will live under his rule in a kingdom of God

Despite the facts related to the actual historical figure of Selassie, as we see, Rastafarians have built an extensive religious mythology around him, and even did so within his lifetime.

The story of Haile Selassie and the development of the Rastafari religion has interesting significance to the question of the historicity of Jesus. Haile Selassie is manifestly a historical figure, but imagine what might come from the following scenario. Imagine if, at some point in the future, the earth suffered a huge civilisational collapse and the vast bulk of the historical record was lost. Imagine then that humans managed to slowly rebuild civilisation and that thousands of years from now historians were trying to piece together facts about the 20th Century. Imagine then that the only records of Selassie's existence that had survived were the devotional accounts of Rastafarians. The only story historians would have to work with would be made up of layers of mythology. The story of Selassie, a man who arose in a time in which Ethiopians were excitedly awaiting the coming of a Messiah, would be filled with references to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, stories of miracles, tales of God walking the earth, and the denial of the reality of the Messiah's death. They would read that Selassie is still alive and that part of the proof of this is that followers can 'communicate in spirit' with him.

As a result of this, surely there would be some who would adopt a 'mythicist' position with regard to the historical Selassie. It would be argued that despite references to a specific historical period and the interweaving of elements into Selassie's story that suggest the factual existence of some historical character beneath all the mythology and stories of miracles there was in fact no Haile Selassie. Selassie would be presented as an entirely fictional figure dreamed up by black nationalists who created a mythical figurehead to galvanise the movement and give hope to its followers. It would be said that later followers misunderstood this narrative approach and mistakenly took Selassie to be someone who had actually lived. The original

Rastafarians, it would be said, never intended to present a story of someone who really existed.

I wish to argue that the phenomenon of Haile Selassie goes some way to presenting a case for the plausibility of a historical Jesus beneath the layers of mythology and religious devotion that have been overlaid onto his story. Indeed, we find a very similar scenario. The Jews of Jesus' time had long endured oppression and a belief had spread that God was going to send a Messiah to His people who would gather them up and institute a reign of righteousness. Among the many Messianic hopefuls we find at the time, there is Jesus, a man whose original message was arguably apocalyptic in nature and who wandered a relatively small area preaching the coming of the Kingdom of God. His early followers believed Jesus, for whatever reason, to be the awaited Messiah and in writings many years after his death and supposed resurrection we find him presented as a saviour figure whose coming and whose actions were prophesied in the Old Testament. He is variously proclaimed as a prophet and as a divine being whose life was permeated with miracles, who had supreme wisdom, who cheated death, and who will ultimately return to save his followers.

The difference between my hypothetical scenario of civilisational collapse above and the case of Jesus is that while the loss of modern media and historical records would be necessary for Selassie's existence to be called into question, there actually are no non-religious accounts of Jesus available to us. However, this is not really particularly surprising. Outside his immediate circle, Jesus was an incredibly marginal figure. Assuming he did exist and was indeed crucified by the Romans, the most we could realistically hope for would be some brief Roman note of his execution. The notion that there should be all sorts of extra-Biblical material covering his life presupposes Jesus was seen as important by major figures and writers of his day, which he obviously wasn't. People who ask why, if Jesus did so many amazing things, he isn't spoken of widely might also

like to ask why the supposedly miraculous aspects of Selassie's life are found only in Rastafarian writings. The same answer holds true for both: the majority of the Gospel accounts of Jesus and his life are plainly unhistorical or greatly exaggerated, as are the majority of Rastafarian beliefs about Selassie. We have many non-religious records of Selassie because he was a significant historical figure independently of Rastafarian beliefs about him. If Selassie was simply an obscure itinerant African preacher and not a political figure, it is possible that we may have only religious records even of him.

What the strange case of Haile Selassie demonstrates is that it is perfectly possible for a real historical figure to become so overlaid with mythology and religious notions that very little factual historical data remains. I contend that the same principle applies to the historical Jesus. That there was a historical figure, most likely a Jewish apocalyptic preacher, whose story was greatly embellished by devotees who misrepresented and exaggerated him in many ways seems to me entirely plausible. That there was no historical Jesus, and that the gospel accounts in their entirety are mythological texts that do not – and were never intended to – refer however obliquely to an actual historical figure seems to me an argument that takes scepticism a step further than it can justifiably go. In common with much of the scholarly community, I am of the view that mythicism cannot adequately account for the very historical hopes of early Christianity, particularly its insistence that the apocalyptic Kingdom is at hand, a Kingdom that was to be on earth and a Kingdom that was seen to be at hand precisely because a charismatic figure proclaimed as the Messiah had announced this to be the case.

Jesus as we find him in the New Testament is undoubtedly a figure far removed from the historical character who fired up the hopes of his earliest followers. Haile Selassie as we find him in Rastafarian devotional literature is also very far from the historical figure we know to have existed. The case of Selassie demonstrates the extent to which a

real historical figure can quickly become mythologised to such a level that he becomes barely recognisable as the human being that he actually was. I contend the same is true of the historical Jesus, and that the fact that the 'accounts' of his life that we have are so manifestly devotional and filled with mythological content is not in itself a definitive argument for the absence in history of a figure on whom they are, however fantastically, based.

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