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## Coping with Babylon: The Proper Rastology

**Director:** Oliver Hill

**Cast:** Mutabaruka, Half Pint, Luciano, Freddie McGregor, Barry Chevannes  
(2005) Rated: Unrated  
US DVD release date: 7 October 2007 (MVD)

by Matthew Kantor

### Burning All Illusion Tonight

Rastafari is known to the world through reggae music. Many interviewees in Oliver Hill's *Coping with Babylon: the Proper Rastology*, who live Rastafari in their daily lives, cite Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Dennis Brown in particular as ambassadors of Jamaica's great folk religion, never seeking to diminish these musicians' roles in spreading the word. Rastafarian imagery has infiltrated popular culture not just through reggae and other kindred music, but also in the form of clothing, fashion, and general iconography. Despite the well-established co-option of the religion's trappings and the tremendous popularity of many reggae, dub, and dancehall artists, *Coping with Babylon: the Proper Rastology* takes a sober, relatively non-musical path in broadcasting the views and roles of Rastafari in the early twenty-first century.

Musicians including Luciano and Freddie McGregor are interviewed but so are leaders of various Rastafarian sects in addition to everyday followers of the faith in both Jamaica and New York. The film serves to remind viewers that Rastafarianism is a religion that deeply affects its practitioners and that music is only one aspect of it. And, like most religions, different sects vary in some of their more significant approaches and practices. Within these, there are those who seek to unify all brethren, and all Rastafarians at least agree without question that His Imperial Majesty Emperor Haile Selassie I was God on earth, as prophesized by Marcus Garvey, one of the original Pan-African black activists in the Americas.

From the earliest days of Rastafarianism in Jamaica, different philosophies infused the practice. *Coping with Babylon: the Proper Rastology* goes into detail about each split. Not surprisingly the Rastafarian practice in Jamaica's countryside is more about dropping out into the bush whereas its practice in Kingston takes on more Christian overtones, in terms of both ritual and in Haile Selassie explicitly being cited as Christ. Rastas believe that the black Africans in the west are the true Biblical Israelites.

However, adherence to Biblical law and strict interpretation of Rastafari through the Bible varies. Similar to many Judeo-Christian religions, it is mentioned that across the rifts, Rastafarianism views homosexuality as sinful. Also, there is a real dearth of women in the film. In fact, based off this DVD, one might think there are a dozen men for every one woman in Jamaica. For all the appropriated Christian doctrine and overlap though, Rastafarians also concur that the Vatican is the seat of Babylon, the latter code for the current, rotten state of being that is the governance of earth by evil western powers.

The ideas of Babylon and of the Pope as a satanic figurehead are not new to Marley fans. The cover of his post-humus album *Confrontation* immediately comes to mind as a representation of Rastas opposing the papacy. Rastas also frequently cite the virtues of peace, love, and harmony and do not take up arms. Fans of Marley will recognize these themes as well. Marley is given his due in the film as an earlier unifier who did not adhere to any particular brand of Rastafari; again the theme of salvation through Rastafarian black unity is familiar to anyone with even passing interest in Marley's work. *Coping with Babylon's* detail serves to inform with new context many ideals and lyrics within Marley's and others' popular reggae music. This knowledge can only deepen existing music fans' appreciation of the very specific religious and philosophical prism through which their heroes created some of their best-known work.

*Coping with Babylon: the Proper Rastology* maintains its sober, non-sensationalized view of Rastafarianism by focusing on the people throughout and by not only not emphasizing reggae but also avoiding the ganja topic. It is mentioned and adherents are seen smoking it while singing and chanting praises to His Imperial Majesty but this is not the film's thrust. This is a less romanticized view of the religion in this film and by focusing on people: it gives meaning to Rastafarianism's only possible birth through the oppressed experience of the descendents of African slaves.

Prominently featured in the film are two black Americans who came to Rastafari while incarcerated in the criminal justice system. Both now

attempt to live the righteous life espoused by Rastafarianism and one of the men even made a pilgrimage to Jamaica where he now resides and practices his faith. These are powerful examples of the religion's redemptive power and potential. *Coping with Babylon: the Proper Rastology* does not force or overdo this aspect of the story. Instead, it shares these men's insights and experiences in a straightforward, non-preachy way, rather than overtly attempting to make the case for the religion's benefits.

That's not to say that the disc is impartial. Its very existence as well as its failure to tackle any of Rasta's contradictions or hazy underpinnings lets it be known that the filmmakers believe in their topic. A lone professor from the University of the West Indies offers academic commentary throughout and that's the closest the film comes to offering any criticism. The professor alludes to the fact that once a Rasta, it is easy to assimilate information into a worldview that explains everything that happens in a context of perpetually unfolding and truthful prophecy. This can quickly devolve into conspiracy theory and the usual specters of microchips, freemasons, and the Illuminati are not without mention from some Rastas in the film.

Interestingly enough, the Rastas do not believe in armed revolt or violence. Across the sects, they believe they live in Babylon, a place where evil and illusion control the planet. Some Rastas see Babylon as spiritual and some it as quite literal. However, rather than struggle, the Rasta credo beyond the acceptance of His Imperial Majesty essentially boils down to tune in, turn on, and drop out. In time, Babylon will fall and the Rastas knowingly sit back and watch the process.

The film concludes with dub poet Mutabaruka citing the wisdom that a great man can meditate on a mountaintop but a greater man can meditate in a crowded marketplace. The marketplace is a metaphor for the noisy race of modern life that Babylon propagates. The Rastas believe in carving out their own space within this on planes mental, spiritual, and physical. It is easy then to understand how reggae has gained popularity across the globe given that the music itself mirrors this philosophy and how desperately modern man and woman need to take the occasional breath.

Rastafarians have concluded that "livity" is the only and righteous way and have turned what is an occasion for some into a serious lifestyle. *Coping with Babylon: the Proper Rastology* serves as a lesson that Rastas are not dreadlocked caricatures but rather real people with concrete motivations and beliefs. They also exhibit many of the same tendencies and character types as all religions. In this sense, though lessened by its inability to ask tough questions, *Coping with Babylon: the Proper Rastology* is a true and valuable documentary.

RATING: 

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