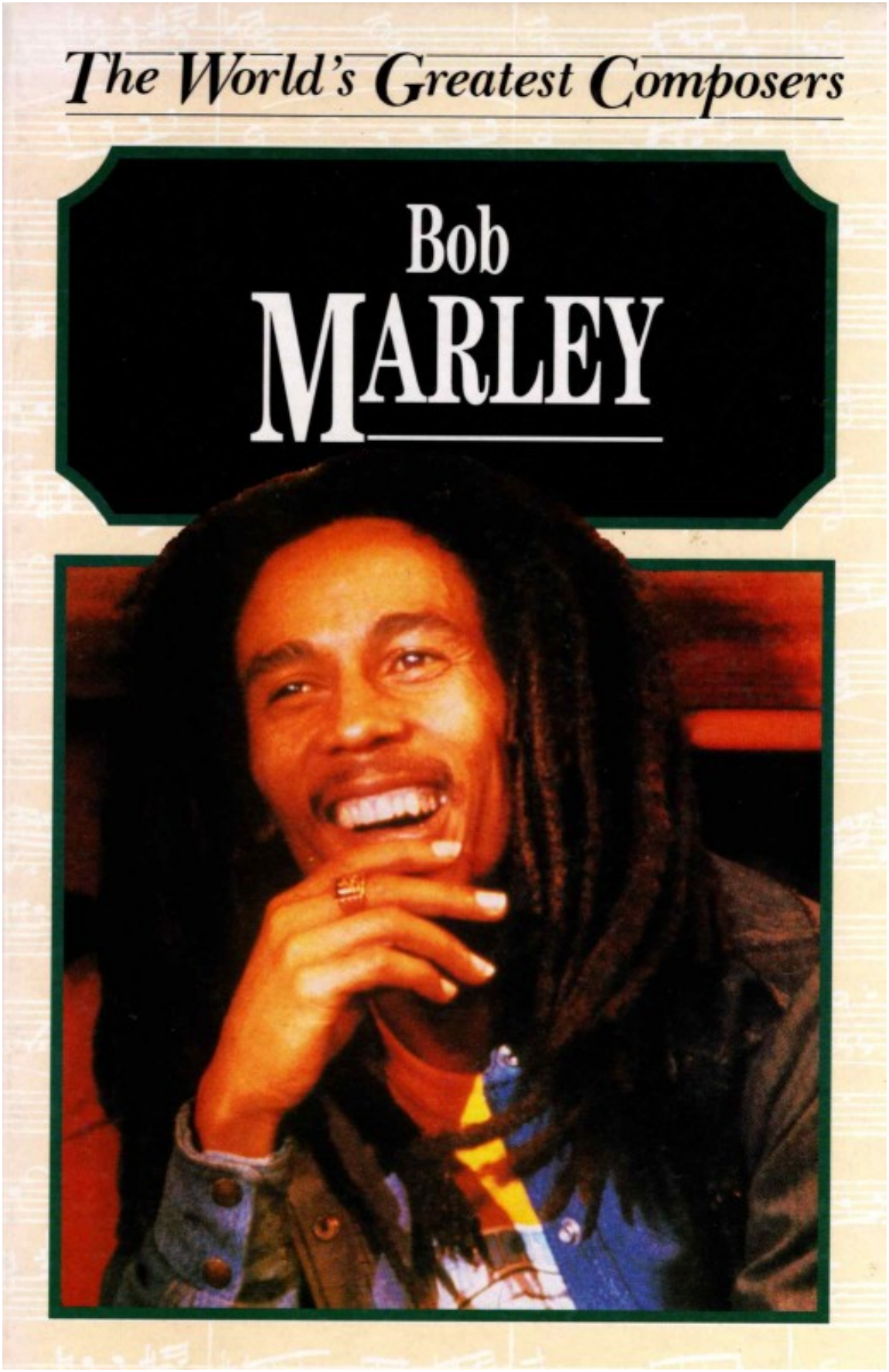


'Redemption Song' – Bob Marley and Rastafari

John Thornley, keynote speaker at the Zoom Annual General Meeting of the Sea of Faith in Aotearoa (SOFiA) 2 September 2023.

Redemption Song by Bob Marley (1980/81)

Old pirates yes they rob I
sold I to the merchant ships
minutes after they took I
from the bottomless pit
But my hand was made strong
by the hand of the almighty
we forward in this generation
triumphantly

Won't you help me sing
these songs of freedom
cos all I ever had
redemption songs
redemption songs.

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery
none but ourselves can free our minds
have no fear for atomic energy
cos none of them can stop the Time
How long shall they kills our prophets
while we stand aside and look
some say it's just a part of it
we've got to fulfil the Book.

Won't you help me sing
these songs of freedom
cos all I ever had
redemption songs
redemption songs.

Bob Marley recorded 'Redemption Song' on 23 September 1980.

In May 1981 Marley died of cancer, just thirty-six years old. I start and end this half hour talk with quotes from two books on Marley and Rastafari. Placed between these two bookends, I'll give you my reading of 'Redemption Song'.

'An adventurer, an entrepreneur, a buccaneer, a visionary' **BONO**

The Islander

My Life in Music and Beyond

Chris Blackwell

with Paul Morley

Part One: Chris Blackwell and Rastafari

The story begins with Chris Blackwell, a European born in Jamaica to a well-established and rich family. He set up Island Recording company and started releasing Marley's music in 1973. In his recent autobiography, *The Islander*, he opens the chapter on his work with Marley with this sentence: 'I was eighteen years old when a Rastaman saved my life.'

He and two friends had taken a boat trip out from Kingston, when they ran out of petrol and beached up on an unfamiliar stretch of land bordered by ocean and mangrove swamp. As leader, Blackwell felt he needed to strike out walking the coast line to seek help.

We let him tell his story: 'By late in the afternoon I was still walking, still searching beyond hope. My thirst had advanced from serious to desperate and I was scarily weak. But in a small clearing I spied a tiny, lopsided wooden hut, held together with bits of string. It was the first sign of life I had seen for hours.We might be saved after all!

I walked towards the hut and looked through a little window, really just a crude cut-out hole. To my terror, I laid eyes on the first Rastafari I had ever seen in my life. He was a bearded man and inscrutable man. His hair was long, stiff and marred, as though made of bark. He looked like he was somewhere between being as old as time and as young as me. Badly dehydrated, utterly lost and near collapse, I now stood face-to-face with one of the 'black heart men' that white Anglo-Jamaican parents warned their kids about.

I had heard a little about the so-called cult of Rastafarianism. The Rastas were eccentrics who swore allegiance to the emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie, whom they believed to be the messiah incarnate.

If you grew up in white Jamaican society in the 1940s and 50s, as I did, you were conditioned to see these Rasta men more as a violent gang than a new religious order or social movement. The colonial government viewed the Rastas as a threat and there were folklore horror stories of them capturing, burning, and sacrificing children. They spoke in a mangled, cryptic dialect that signalled a headstrong disregard for English rule. They wore their hair in knotted plaits called dreadlocks, which made them look intimidating.

I never quite bought into the propaganda, as the Rastafari had never caused harm to me or anyone I knew. The Rastas deliberately kept their distance, absenting themselves from a white society that held them in ill regard.

But, because I had never so much laid my eyes upon a Rasta, they still existed in my head as bogeymen. In my confused, parched state, on the verge of passing out, I looked at the man before me and thought: This might be the end.

Instead, he beckoned me towards him, motioning me into his rickety beach hut. I asked the man for some water. Immediately I noted an ethereal gentleness about him. Moving with a dancer's grace, he brought me a little gourd filled with water. Whatever fears I had felt moments earlier instantly dissipated Still wobbly and faint, I asked the man if I could lie down. He carefully prepared a space for me in the corner of the hut. Within seconds, I was asleep.

Two or three hours later, I awoke to find five more Rastas in the hut along with my host. The six of them sat around softly reading to each other from the Bible. The first thing that they did upon seeing that I was awake, was offering me some plant-based food. Once again I was almost overcome by the incredible, mystic gentleness that surrounded me. These were good men of faith. They were not burning children or plotting a violent revolution. Without hesitation, they had taken in and looked after a frail, helpless white boy who had stumbled across them and collapsed in their midst.

As I ate, they carried on reading to each other from the Bible, discussing among themselves what they were reading. Thoughtful debate and exchange seemed an important part of their lives. Once I had regained my strength, they took me by boat back to Kingston.

It had been an incredible, life-changing experience. It would be another seventeen years before I began working with Rastarafian's most celebrated advocate and ambassador, Bob Marley. At this date in the mid fifties Reggae didn't yet exist.

But a seed was planted that day. When I recorded the classic first Bob Marley and the Wailers session in the late 60s I appreciated how Rastafari teachings were the soulful centre of Reggae music. And, then in my late teen

years, never would I have imagined that this peaceful community of outcasts would form a central part of Jamaica's move to independence in the 60s, and by the next century, to its international destiny.

Part Two: 'Redemption Song', Verse One

My wife Gillian and I lived in Trinidad between 1967 and 1969. Both Jamaica and Trinidad, the two largest West Indian islands, achieved independence from Britain in the early 60s, so we lived with the citizens of new nation states attempting to find their own feet as independent countries of the Third World. I share my reflections in two parts, each dealing with a single verse.

These are the opening four lines of Verse One:

Old pirates, yes they rob I
Sold I to the merchant ships
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.

400 years of the story of slavery and colonisation are summed up in these lines. The 'bottomless' pit is a life of oppression and sufferation; it can refer to the storage pens that held West Africans in captivity before they were shipped as human cargo to the Caribbean and North American sugar and cotton plantations. It can refer to the hulls of slave ships.

Or it may also refer to a literal pit. The word 'pit' is found in the story of Joseph found in the book of Genesis. His jealous brothers stripped him of his coat of many colours and threw him into a pit. From Chapter 37 in Genesis: 'And it came to pass, when Joseph was come unto his brethren, that they stripped Joseph out of his coat, his coat of many colours that was on him. And they took him, and cast him into a pit; the pit was empty, there was no water in it.'Later they sell him off to Egyptian trader, to become a slave building the pyramids.

Here begins the story of Joseph, the Israelite superman, whose powers of interpreting dreams gained him favours in the court of Pharoah. He is promoted to oversight of the granaries storing surplus food for the famine years. Because of Bob Marley's rise to power out of poverty, and because he was the generous

giver of food and other material goods to the poor, the Jamaican populace called Marley ‘Joseph’. It was known that out of his wealth gained through his music, Marley offered a private social welfare service to the residents of Kingston and outlying regions.

Let’s return to history as told in the Hebrew scriptures. While Joseph’s fortunes flourished his people, the Israelites, remained as slaves building the temples and pyramids of Egypt. A later leader, Moses, led them through the desert wilderness into the promised land of Canaan. Here, under the leadership of David and Solomon, they enjoyed material wealth – , the ruling class at least were well off. These ‘glory days’ are followed by further enslavement in Babylon under Assyrian overlords. From 2000 to 500 BC, it’s a 1500 year history of mixed fortunes, with the few periods of peace and wealth broken by longer periods of warfare and poverty.

And moving now to the 16th century, and European imperialism. For the Caribbean islands and southern states of USA, there came 400 years of slavery, colonisation and second class citizenship. The oppression continues today as racial tensions in the US demonstrate. Often overlooked is the spiritual faith of the Black churches that sustains and empowers contemporary church and community collective wellness and protests. Marley’s lines testify to this spiritual faith in God, described as the Almighty, Jah, or Jehovah – three differing words used in reggae lyrics for God:

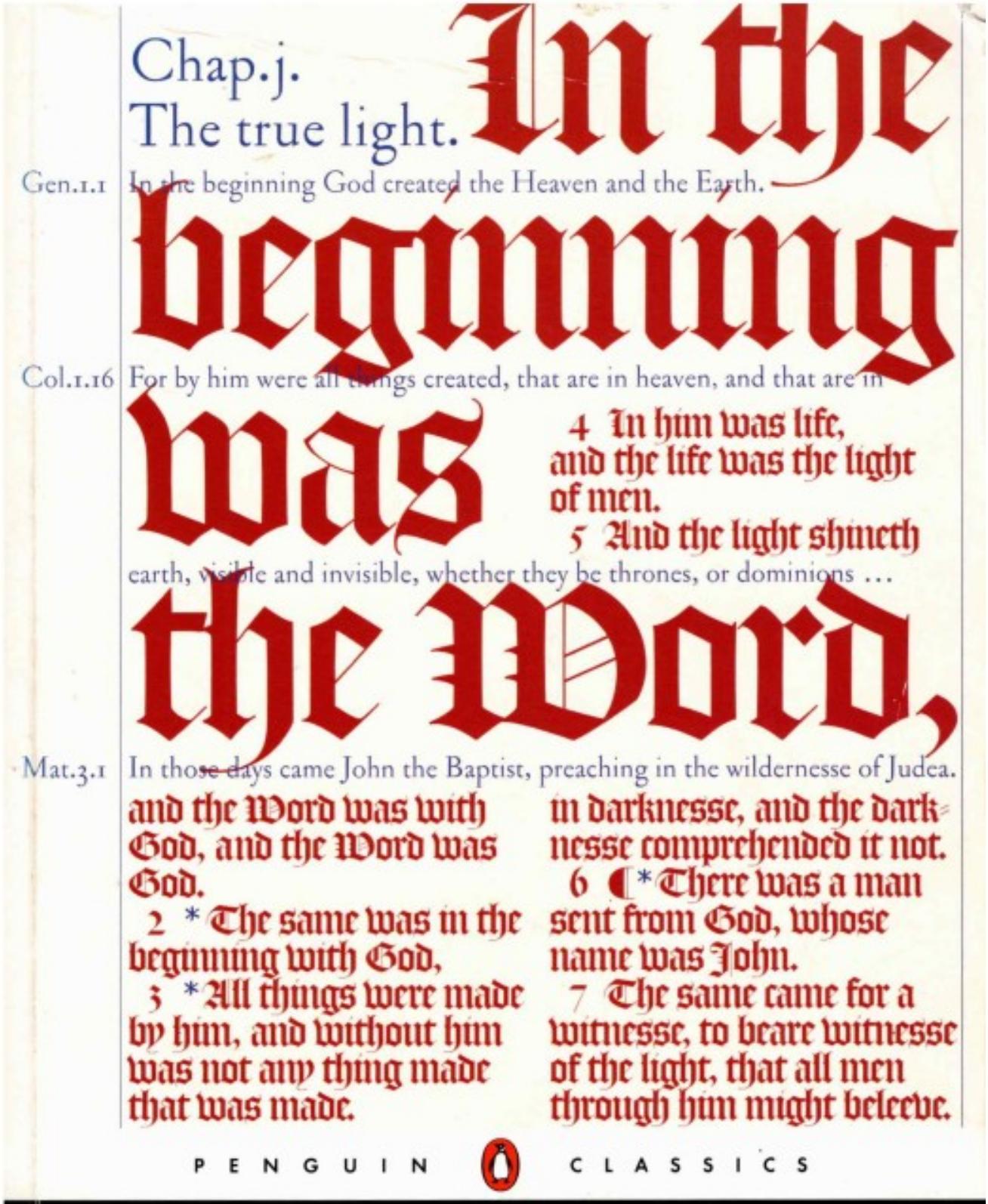
But my hand was made strong/by the hand of the Almighty
We forward in this generation/triumphantly

The word ‘pit’ is not just found in the Genesis story. The imagery of the ‘pit’ is found in several Psalms. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann in a book titled Praying the Psalms, describes the experience of ‘the pits’ as being, quote/unquote, ‘powerless, abandoned, forgotten, lonely, helpless, cheated.’

Brueggemann’s conclusion: ‘These psalms attest that a life of faith does not protect us from the pit. Rather, the power of God brings us out of the pit to new life. When one is in the pit, one cannot believe or imagine that good can come again. For that reason, the psalmist finally focuses not on the pit but on

the One who rules there and everywhere. It is the reality of God that makes clear that the pit is not the place ‘where you ought to be’.

The Psalms were key documents in the worship of Rastafari groups, chanted to the rhythms of African-based drums. We take a closer look at Psalm 30, in the words found in the Authorised or 1611 version of the Bible, commonly used in Jamaican churches and schools in Marley’s times. This reading is a prayer of confession and God’s acceptance of our prayer to be restored and renewed in our adoration of God, and our commitment and celebration of God’s way of living for all humankind. The Psalm moves from the depths of despair to the release of the spirit in the rhythms of dancing.


Chap.j.
The true light.

In the

Gen.1.1 In the beginning God created the Heaven and the Earth.

beginning

Col.1.16 For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in

was

4 In him was life,
and the life was the light
of men.
5 And the light shineth

earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions ...

the Word,

Mat.3.1 In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wildernesse of Judea.

and the Word was with
God, and the Word was
God.
2 *The same was in the
beginning with God,
3 *All things were made
by him, and without him
was not any thing made
that was made.

in darknesse, and the dark-
nesse comprehended it not.
6 *There was a man
sent from God, whose
name was John.
7 The same came for a
witnesse, to beare witnesse
of the light, that all men
through him might beleeve.

PENGUIN CLASSICS

The Bible

Psalm 30

1611 Authorised (King James) Version of the Bible

I will extol thee, O Lord, for thou hast lifted me up,
And hast not made my foes to rejoice over me.
O Lord, My God, I cried unto thee, and thou hast healed me.
O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from the grave:
Thou hast kept me alive,
THAT I SHOULD NOT GO DOWN TO THE PIT.

Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of his, and give thanks
at the remembrance of his holiness.
For his anger endureth but a moment; in his favour is life:
weeping may endure for a night,
but joy cometh in the morning.

And in my prosperity I said, 'I shall not be moved'.
Lord, by thy favour thou has made
My mountain to stand strong:
Thou didst hide thy face, and I was troubled.
I cried to thee, O Lord:
And unto the Lord I made supplication.

What profit is there in my blood, WHEN I GO DOWN TO THE PIT?
Shall the dust praise thee? Shall it declare thy truth?
Hear, O Lord, and have mercy upon me:
Lord, be thou my helper.

Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing:
thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness:
to the end that my glory may sing praise to thee,
And not be silent. O Lord my God.
I will give thanks unto thee for ever.

(Use of Upper Case – chosen by author to highlight the words)

The picture is at the funeral of Bob Marley held in the National Arena, Kingston. In September 1980 Bob Marley's cancer had reached an advanced stage. His wife Rita arranged a baptism for Bob in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which they had always attended when they were touring. All of Marley's children were baptised in to this church. The baptism was held on 4 November 1980. As Timothy White writes:

Taking the name 'Berhane Selassie' (meaning Light of Trinity), he had become a Christian Rasta'. The elders of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church led the service, observing the full rituals of their ancient faith.

Part Three: 'Redemption Song', Verse Two

The second verse opens with these lines:

Emancipate your selves / from mental slavery
none but ourselves / can free our minds

The physical slavery has gone – the Emancipation movement fought and won the battle for freedom from physical chains, but the new nations now live under new forms of slavery or oppression. As Bob sings in another song, 'Concrete Jungle': No chains around my feet, but I'm not free'. Oppression is both collective and personal, though often the two go together.

In the 60s, the economies of Jamaica and Trinidad were controlled by multinational companies: Tate and Lyle for sugar, Alcan for bauxite and the North American tourist companies controlling international tourism. The northern beaches in Jamaica, including Montego Bay, were hotel sites. The only blacks who go on those beaches were waiters.

In the late twentieth century, the West Indian states entered independence with a deep racism based on skin colour. Darker to lighter pigmentations were reflected in rigid class or status divisions, entrenched through educational and job opportunities. Personal enslavement to this lower ranking leads to a fatalistic acceptance of this 'mental slavery'. This is what indigenous social scientists and musicians rebelled against.

What is the response to these challenges to the individual and to the community? Marley's reply is quite clear: None but ourselves/can free our minds. It's our responsibility.

The singer goes on to the threat of nuclear weapons. At this time there were rumours that South Africa may be developing nuclear weapons: 'Have no fear for atomic energy, cos none of them can stop the Time'.

I use the Upper Case for the word 'time'. It can be said there are two forms of 'Time': mechanical time, as measured by the clock, the literal meaning of the word. And second, the metaphorical or quality use of 'Time' signifying 'the time to make a choice, judgment time, time for a decisive response and action.

When Public Enemy and other rap groups in the States went on the streets a few years ago, with placards saying What Time is it? they weren't asking if it was 2.30 or 3.00 o'Clock, They were challenging people to make choices about attitudes to people of another colour or culture, to turn from making war to making peace, and to face up to the growing gap between rich & poor.

How long shall they kill our prophets / While we stand aside and look

The prophets he sings about are people like Martin Luther King, Malcolm X and the Kennedy brothers in America, Mahatma Gandhi in India & other well-known figures who literally gave their lives for the greater good. I would want to add as unnamed saints, the millions of mothers, fathers and caregivers who daily work selflessly for their children, that they may have life now and in the future.

Some say it's just a part of it / We've got to fulfil the Book.

This could be read literally, referring to the 70 years and ten, the Book of Life. usually implying a dreary struggle for survival. But in the light of the warm tones of Marley's voice and in the context of the song as a whole I would favour a more positive reading of these words: if the book, with a capital B, is the Bible, then the song affirms the Hebrew Scriptures. The journey from slavery to freedom, both physical and spiritual, is the pilgrimage journey told in the sacred scriptures, through priest and prophet, and given expression in poetry and song.

The chorus is an expression of humility and hope. The singer invites us to join him in the ongoing struggle for peace and justice. 'O won't you help me sing these songs of freedom'.

A final note to bring this talk back to Aotearoa. The title of Judith Binney's 1995 biography of the nineteenth century Maori leader Te Kooti, is titled *Redemption Song*. It shows how the heart of his teachings were in the song poems that he wrote. Marley would have loved the quotation on the back cover of the book: 'Wherever Te Kooti went - wherever he step foot from one area to another - he's singing!'

As Bob Marley sings:

Cos all I ever had / redemption song / redemption song

Neil MacGregor

LIVING *WITH THE* GODS

ON BELIEFS AND PEOPLES

BASED ON THE AWARD-WINNING BBC RADIO 4 SERIES

allen lane

Part Four: Closing Bookend – final words on Rastafari

I close with some words from Neil MacGregor's book *Living with Gods: on Beliefs and Peoples*. The writer's background is curator and Director in museum and art gallery settings.

With a little editing I write the concluding words. William Henry is a Jamaican-born lecturer at the University of West London. His words open this passage: 'When I younger, you had to be a black African and oppressed by white people to embrace Rastafari, but it's always in flux If you see your suffering represented in what it suggests, then you can embrace Rastafari. It has become a global voice for anybody who thinks that they are oppressed or down-pressed, a universal voice for the voice-less.'

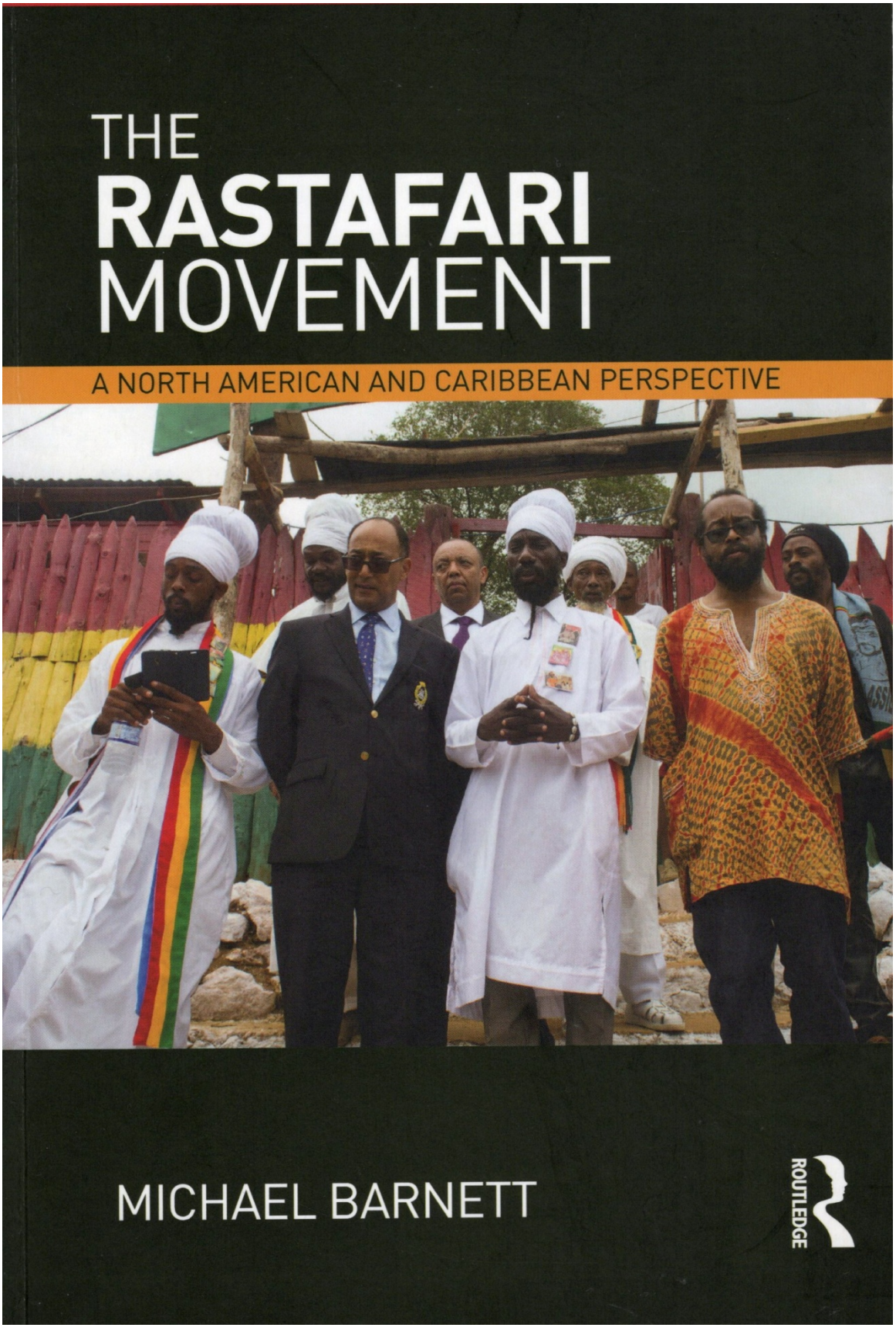
The late Irish singer Sinead O'Connor produced an album in Jamaica, supported by top reggae artists, with original lyrics of spiritual fervour and power. Title of CD: Throw Down Your Arms. The notes say that 10% of the profits from the sale of this record will be given for the care of the Rasta elders in Jamaica.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church, with Haile Selassie as head, has become a symbol of hope to many across the world as much because of his defeat, as because of his later triumph. His ignominious death in 1975, imprisoned and humiliated by rebels, did little to diminish his stature. We move to London.

Mass-produced button-badges, depicting Haile Selassie and Ethiopia/Africa as the promised land were sold at the 1982 Notting Hill Carnival, celebrated by the Afro-Caribbean migrants to London. From Ethiopia to Jamaica, and now back to one of the old imperial capitals of Europe, the cult has moved again.

How has this happened? Europeans, at different times, have used military power, economic supremacy and organised mission, to spread their versions of Christianity. By contrast, says William Henry, Rastafari has used none of this, but has spread its beliefs in much gentler ways. Quote from William Henry:

'Music is central to Rastafari. It is the vehicle, it is the main medium for getting out that message because, if you think about it, in the world know of Rastafari through music, often through Bob Marley. Reggae music is the foremost global voice for the oppressed.'



The reach of that global voice has been enormous. Michael Barnett's estimate of global figures for followers of Rastafari is between 700,000 and one million. Rastafari sings of Ethiopia as Zion – the Reign of God - but not as a familiar place, as the Jews sing of Jerusalem when captive in Babylon. The

Ethiopia of the Rastafari is no longer a nation state defined by its religion, but a homeland of the suffering spirit , which all may enter, and where they will find God on their side.'

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Things are not the way they used to be
I won't tell you no lie
One and all have to face reality now
Though I've tried to find the answers
To all the questions they ask
Though I know it's impossible
To go on living through the past
Don't tell no lie

There's a natural mystic
Blowing through the air
Can't keep them down
If you listen carefully now
You will hear.

Opening track to 1977 album Exodus