A table of contents for *Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

CJET

Caribbean Journal of Evangelical Theology

CONTENTS

**SAM SHARPE AND THE
FUTURE OF CARIBBEAN
THEOLOGY: The ToSS
Is Important!**

D. Vincent Palmer
member
**Caribbean Association of
Theological Educators**

Abstract

If Sam Sharpe had a way with words as all the evidence seems to point, in what way or ways did his linguistic capability influence the success of his mission to see a Jamaica devoid of the dehumanizing effects of slavery? And can we learn anything else from this national hero to aid us in our struggle to advance the cause to free ourselves from mental slavery, while at the same time celebrating the gains Sharpe and others have fought for? The paper explores and interrogates the potential of a significant part of the legacy of Daddy Sharpe as a way to continue the conversation of the ongoing project of Caribbean Theology in the 21st Century.

Introduction

The roots of Caribbean Theology may be traced to the formulation of theological objections against slavery by enslaved Africans. This represents the first stage. The second stage emerged with people like Sam Sharpe, who saw in the words of Jesus ("No man can serve two masters") a powerful broadside against the colonizers who sought to prolong that which was inevitably doomed to fail. But it was not until the middle of the twentieth century when a representational gathering of the churches throughout the region met in Trinidad to analyze the Caribbean's theological inheritance that things began to take shape.

One of the discoveries made at that conference was that serious deficits in terms of relevance attend the brand of theology that was inherited from the North Atlantic region. It was therefore decided from that point onwards that any theological enterprise in the region should purposefully engage not only academics and clergy, but the so-called laity as well. Right now laity, clergy, and the wider population are still basking in the sunshine of over sixty years of independence in at least two Caribbean states. Some West Indians are still celebrating the Twenty20 world cup trophies (male and female!) won years ago. Another cause for rejoicing, far less auspicious than the aforementioned events,

is the publication of the first theological monograph on Sam Sharpe. A brief review of this groundbreaking theological piece[1] follows.

Sam Sharpe's Legacy of Resistance in the Interest of a Re-ordered Society

Both the history of Caribbean Theology and its sequel represent in no small measure the legacy of the want-to-disturb-my-neighbour work of Sharpe, the youngest of Jamaica's national heroes. Like Yohann Blake and Theodore Whitmore after him, Sam Sharpe was a native of St James, and like his Master before him, Sharpe, was executed by the colonial powers of the day in the prime of his life.[2] He was viewed as a man of superior intellect by his peers—an attribute that fitted him well to function as a "counter-cultural prophetic force. . . . It is [also] arguable that the ability to inspire and persuade others to pursue action they would not have done under normal circumstances attests to the nature of" his sharp intellect.[3] This and other qualities have convinced Dr Reid-Salmon (hereafter 'the writer') that the life of Sharpe is worthy of theological reflection in its own right. Following this, the writer then examines some of the views regarding the civil disturbance attributed to Sharpe's leadership just around the time usually celebrating his Master's first advent. Here the writer argues for a theological understanding of the event and suggests its relevance for a postcolonial engagement. The writer next turns his attention to an interrogation of the socio-political situation of Sharpe's day, with a focus on what he calls Black religion in dialogue with North-Atlantic misinterpretation of Christianity, in order to forge an authentic Black theology of emancipation. Just about half-way through his monograph the writer engages in a critical discussion of certain trends of contemporary theology that appear to marginalize "faith in Jesus Christ as liberator"[4] and carries out his own 'theological damage control' in the face of the perceived challenge.

The second part of this section is more constructive and aims at showing how "Sharpe gave voice to his faith though (sic) his quest for liberation." "Sharpe's faith," we are told, "was born out of the contingencies, complexities, struggles and sufferings of Black"lives that matter, enabling him not only to make sense of life but also "sustained him as he encountered the terror of struggle" in pursuit

---

[1] Delroy Reid-Salmon, *Burning for Freedom: A Theology for the Black Atlantic Struggle for Freedom* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2012).

[2] Historian Devon Dick (*The Cross and the Machete: Native Baptists of Jamaica--Identity , Ministry and Legacy* [Kingston: Ian Randle, 2010], 47) believes that Sharpe died in his twenties.

[3] Reid-Salmon, *Burning for Freedom*, 5-6. It is now recognised that involvement in violent action was a last resort for Sharpe (cf., for example, Luther's posture on similar matters, according to K.D. Rathbun, "Shortcomings of the Reformation: Unity versus Purity in the Ecclesiology and Praxis of Martin Bucer," doctoral thesis, UWI 2006, 29-30).

[4] Reid-Salmon, *Burning for Freedom*, 54.

of liberation.[5]   The faith of the national hero is further fleshed out in terms of personal equality, justice, and what the writer calls "embodiment"—an intentional "identification with Christ's own passion and commitment to human liberation . . . [that] serves as a model of liberating faith."[6] (Here the writer comes close to Callam's thesis[7] on how we can overcome racial divisiveness through the experience of Eucharistic 'embodiment'.)   In the closing chapters, the writer discusses in turn how the oppressed can be the agents of their own liberation, the vicissitudes of Caribbean people of faith in the Diaspora vis-à-vis the constructed Sam Sharpe theological paradigm, and finally, a summary of its interpretive significance. "While Sam Sharpe left no ideology, theology, philosophy, religious institution, party, or followers, he left a legacy to future generations. This legacy is the challenge to continue the work of equality, freedom, and justice in the cause of liberation. Also, this is the liberation of people's minds so that they can have a clearer sense of identity and greater awareness of self-determination and freedom by how they live their lives."[8]

In this paper I would like to continue the conversation by focusing attention on Sam Sharpe's linguistic ability as a   liberative resource and its implication for Caribbean theology going forward; but before that I make a couple of remarks.
First, I think that both the writer and the publisher of *Burning for Freedom* should be commended for the timing of the tome (coinciding with Jamaica's Jubilee celebrations). Caribbean publishers seem reluctant to consider works of theology, and who can blame them? Second, I believe we can all agree with the writer that the life of Sam Sharpe certainly challenges us to love God and his image-bearers sincerely and to seek to do the will of God in our generation with uncommon courage.

Although the writer is sympathetic to aspects of liberation theology as well as Caribbean theology, his vision is not limited to these expressions of reflection. He is perhaps rightly critical of Erskine, if indeed he seeks the locus of salvific activity outside the church. Erskine book[9] is primarily about Rastafari, arguably the religious phenomenon with the greatest impact on the Jamaican society and to a lesser extent the wider Caribbean.[10] A few others in recent times have sought

---

[5] Ibid., 6. Reid-Salmon's work on the faith of Sharpe also calls into serious question all those who posit a jihadist interpretation of the action of the national hero (e.g., Dale Bisnauth, "The 1831/2 Jamaica Slave Revolt: The Case for Holy War," *CJRS* 21.1 [2007]: 28-44).

[6] Ibid., 76.
[7] Neville Callam, *From Fragmention to Wholeness*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2017; this was also inspired by the courage of Sam Sharpe. See especially pp. vii-x.
[8] Ibid., 143.
[9] Noel Leo Erskine, *From Garvey to Marley: Rastafari Theology* (Miami: University Press of Florida, 2007).
[10] See, e.g., "Jah Lives," http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20121021/lead/lead6.html.

to chart the course of this movement.[11]   Notwithstanding the Rastafarian influence in the culture, the church continues to make its mark, though it seems to some that it is not keeping pace with other institutions of social change.

 Rastafari is not as old as the Messianic community in Jamaica. If it were, there is little doubt that it would certainly would have been in the forefront of the fight for "the African-Jamaican on his remote plantation, [helping to] destroy slavery and the West Indian sugar monopoly in England," along with the evangelicals. What is doubtful though is that Rastafari would have established a white-black alliances based on religious convictions.[12]

 If it is doubtful that Erskine has read the church's role in liberation fairly, it is also questionable that the author of *Burning Freedom* has properly understood the writer of *From Garvey to Marley* on this point. Like Reid-Salmon's monograph, Erskine's monograph is an important pioneering effort. Erskine sees his work as a continuation of an earlier piece[13] in which themes of struggle and salvation are explored. From *Garvey to Marley* develops these motifs against the backdrop of Rastafari reflection on bibliology, Christology and redemptive eschatology, with H.I.M. Haile Selassie as the focal point. In reading this book, one could very easily get the impression that it was written by an insider. This is how much the author's 'Jamaicaness' and understanding of the movement dominate; and this is how much his empathy with the Rastafari agitation for liberation from Babylon shines through.

My only disappointment, as noted elsewhere, is that Erskine did not interact with the programmatic work of Barbara Blake Hannah--the first Rasta to have put pen to paper on the movement. But otherwise Erskine has done an excellent job in outlining the beliefs and praxis of Rastafari which have so far resisted any attempt at systematization. In sum, *Garvey to Marley*, then, is much more positive toward Rastafari as a liberative force than *Burning for Freedom*. In other words, *Burning for Freedom* shares more in common with Caribbean theologians like Burchell Taylor (who, as far as I know was the first to advance the thought that Philemon's slave initiated his own liberation)[14] and Devon Dick (who also

---

[11] E.g., N.S. Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions*. (Philadelphia: Temple University, 2010), 286-320; D. Vincent, *Messianic 'I' and Rastafarl.* Plymouth: UPA, 2010; Ennis Edmonds and Michelle Gonzalez, *Caribbean Religious History: An Introduction* (New York: NYU, 2010), 177-202, and to a lesser extent, Dianne Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (NY: Oxford, 2005).

[12] Philip Sherlock and Hazel Bennett, *The Story of the Jamaica People* (Kingston: IRP. 1998), 177.

[13] Noel Leo Erskine, *Decolonizing Theology: A Caribbean Perspective* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1998).

[14] "Onesimus—the Voiceless Initiator of the Liberating Process," in *Caribbean Theology: Preparing for the Challenges Ahead*, ed. Howard Gregory (Bridge Town, Barbados: Canoe, 1995), 17-22.

emphasizes similar values of the national hero),[15] than with the theological contribution of the latest world religion.

A word about our hero's fundamental frame of reference: *Burning for Freedom* also points to the central place of Scripture in the theology and self-understanding of Sharpe; this was what shaped his life and commitment to the will of God. For example, "When he was asked about the basis and reason for the revolt, Sam Sharpe responded by appealing to the authority of Bible Witness using claims such as 'No man can serve two masters' Matt. 6:24); 'If the Son therefore shall make you free, you shall be free indeed.' (John 8:36); 'Ye are bought with a price; be not ye servants of men' (1 Cor. 7:23)."[16] It was this level of commitment that took him to the gallows, to the grave, to glory: "If I've done wrong . . . I trust I shall be forgiven; for I cast myself upon the atonement . . . I depend for salvation upon the Redeemer who shed his blood upon Calvary for sinners."[17]

Sam Sharpe's Language[18] *of Renewal in Pursuit of the Re-ordering of Society*

Here, as promised above, I would like to continue the worthwhile dialogue of Sam Sharpe's legacy by looking at the communication skills of this hero as a way of doing third-millennium Caribbean theology. The research of Dick and Reid-Salmon has confirmed what we know already, that Sharpe was a master communicator. Thus we are not surprised to read the following testimony: "I heard him two or three times deliver a brief extemporaneous address to his fellow prisoners on religious topics . . . and I was amazed at the power and freedom with which he spoke and the effect which was produced upon his auditory."[19] Their research also implies that this domestic slave was fluent in the

---

[15] "The Origin and Development of the Native Baptists in Jamaica and the Influence of their Biblical Hermeneutic on the 1865 Native Baptist War, PhD thesis, University of Warwickshire," 2008. See especially, chapter 5 section 4 entitled Emphases of Sam Sharpe, pp. 249-258; idem, *The Cross and the Machete*, 105-121.

[16] Reid-Salmon, *Burning for Freedom*, 28.

[17] Ibid., 24.

[18] From here on ToSS (the Tongue of Sam Sharpe). While this essay is forward looking, ToSS enables the writer to also draw inspiration from the twenty years of West Indian dominance in the game of cricket. Yes, it is true that nostalgia is like Jamaican grammar; it finds the past perfect and the present tense!

[19] Reid-Salmon, *Burning for Freedom*, 5. Okeef Saunders (http://jamaica-gleaner.com/gleaner/20121018/letters/letters4.html) attributes the following to Sharpe: "Do you want to hear about the power in your hands?" Sam Sharpe bent down and took something from the ground. "What I got in my hand?" asked Daddy Sharpe. "A stone. I am holding up this stone; it is my hand which keeps the stone from falling. This stone depends on my hand, but my hand is gaining nothing from holding this stone. So I open my fingers, and look!" The preacher opened his fingers and the stone fell. "My hand was gaining nothing from holding up this rough old stone," he said. "It only causes my fingers to hurt. So I opened my hand and the stone fell. This is the power in my hand and in your hands. Our hands are holding up the estate owners, all the estate owners. We are not paid, neither do we have our freedom. So, my brothers, I think it is time that we open our hands."

King's language. This is significant, especially in light of Abrahams' observation that

> *The language of imperial Europe and its imperial god reinforced European*
> *overlordship and control. In the end it was that same language, the English language,*
> *and the Christian Bible which became the most powerful tools used by the descendants*
> *of the slaves in their liberation efforts and the forging of a place for themselves*
> *in an increasingly global environment. The language in which the black America*
> *Dubois defined the problem of the twentieth century was English. And he used it*
> *most gracefully and eloquently. The language in which Garvey exhorted black folk*
> *to self-awareness, self-respect, black dignity, black enterprise, was English. And he*
> *used it as shock therapy to redefine black awareness. The language of the British*
> *Empire became, in Asia, in Africa and in the islands of the seas wherever the Union*
> *Jack flew, the language of emancipation, of the struggle for freedom. Gandhi used*
> *it. Nehru used it like a poet. Mandela used it--though these three, and others, had not*
> *been deprived of their own native language.* Italics added.

Abrahams went on to say, "Only those, whose forebears had endured the Middle passage, like Garvey and Dubois, *had no other*. So the English language, in this century, long before it became the world's first language, was mobilized and used in the service of the freedom struggle."[20] Sam Sharpe and others like him knew well the value of employing this language in a subversive manner. But it is not exactly true to say that "Garvey and Dubois, had no other." At least the former had his Jamaican, which became an even more powerful tool of emancipation, and I posit that the venerable Sam Sharpe did likewise, that is, he not only employed the language of the slave master as a tool of liberation; he also made good use of the developing Jamaican dialect available in his day (which in the rest of this paper we shall call the Talk of Sam Sharpe [ToSS]). But is this a reasonable assumption to make? The answer is in the negative, if we fail to come to grips with the notion that many like Sharpe were in actuality bi-lingual. They were both conversant and comfortable with the lines of discourse handed down to them as well as with the heart language of their own kind.[21] Moreover,

> Among the most widespread fallacies about slave societies in the New World is
> the belief that slaves were unable to communicate with each other because of the

---

[20] Peter Abrahams, *The Black Experience in the 20th Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 14-15; italics mine.

[21] So, although details of his life are fragmentary (F. W. Kennedy, *Daddy Sharpe: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Samuel Sharpe* [Kingston: IRP, 2008] vii), Sharpe's bilingualism is quite a reasonable assumption. For a partial lexicon of ToSS, see idem, *Daddy Sharpe*, 379-382; F. G. Cassidy, *Jamaica Talk: Three Hundred Years of English Language in Jamaica* (London: MacMillan, 1961); E. Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 256, 334-336; Hyacinth Boothe, "Gospel and Culture—Accommodation or Tension? An Enquiry into the Priorities of the Gospel in Light of Jamaica's Historical-cultural Experience vis-á-vis Western Christian Civilisation," PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 1988 (see especially p. 369 n.183 for a few Jamaican proverbs in ToSS).

wide diversity and mutual non-intelligibility of African Languages and dialects and because they … were systematically separated.…[22]

The genesis of this heart language (ToSS) has been a matter of dispute among Creole linguists.[23] Some of these scholars hold to what is called the mono-genetic theory which traces all Caribbean Creoles to a common Portuguese based pidgin. Other linguists support the poly-genetic model which theorizes that ToSS and others like it have developed independently.[24] Along these lines, one writer rightly notes that, "It is absurd to assume, as has been the tendency among a great many anthropologists and sociologists, that all traces of Africa were erased from the Negro's mind because he learned English. The very nature of the English the Negro spoke and still speaks drops the lie on that idea."[25] This is similar to the observation of one missionary-translator[26] from Jamaica to Nigeria, "The Ibo language is a very fascinating study. The sort of English or Jamaica dialect . . . commonly heard on our streets in Jamaica contains many Ibo words. For example, *unu* for you, [and] *soso* for only . . . *The presence of these and other words in our every day speech seems to indicate that a large proportion of our people are descendants of the Ibos.*"[27]

Whatever the proper account of how ToSS originated, the study of its linguistic character has progressed to the point where a dictionary, a writing guide and a grammar have been produced. And following the lead of Haiti and St Lucia, the Bible Society of the West Indies (in conjunction with Wycliffe Caribbean), is in the process of translating the entire Bible.[28]   These are a far cry from the days of Sharpe when the preface to one of the accounts of ToSS reads in part, "This little work was never intended originally to meet the eyes of the public; the writer merely prepared it

---

[22] Mervin Alleyne, *Roots of Jamaican Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1989).

[23] See especially Gosnell L, O. Yorke's contribution to, "*A Guide to Bible Translation: People, Languages, Topics* (edited by Philip Noss et al. Maitland Fl.: Xulon/Swindon:UBS, 2019), 163f.

[24] Salikoko Mufwene, "Creole Genesis: A Population Genetics Perspective." *In Caribbean Language Issues Old & New.* Edited by Pauline Christie (Bridgetown/Kingston/Port of Spain: UWI, 1996), 163-196.

[25] J. L. Dillard, *Black English* (New York: Random House, 1972), vii.

[26] Waibinte E. Wariboko, *Ruined by "Race": Afro-Caribbean Missionaries and the Evangelization of Southern Nigeria 1895-1925.* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2007), 89; italics original.

[27] While we agree with Oral Thomas ("A Resistant Biblical Hermeneutic within the Caribbean," *Black Theology* 6.3 [2008], 334) that essentially "cultural-literacy consciousness is a knowing about ourselves as Caribbean peoples," we question why knowledge of the vernacular is not a part of this construct, since "To be made a disciple is not the same as to become North American or European [but on the contrary, it is to affirm] the culture of the region, especially and including African cultural retention . . . [which may be] absolutely compatible with obedience and faith" (Garnett Roper, "Caribbean Theology as Public Theology" PhD thesis, Exeter University, 2011, 14). Nevertheless, Thomas's call for a broadened cultural-literacy consciousness is a welcome one; it is definitely in keeping with Delroy Reid-Salmon's desire to include "the Caribbean Diasporan experience . . . [as] an important and valuable source for theological discourse" ("A Sin of Black Theology," *Black Theology* 6.2 [2008], 154).

[28] L. Emilie Adams, *Understanding Jamaican Patois: An Introduction to Afro-Jamaican Grammar* (Kingston: LMH Publishers 1991); *Writing Jamaican the Jamaican Way/Ou fi Rait Jamiekan* (The Jamaican Language Unit/Di Jamiekan Langwij Yuunit: Arawak, 2009); F. G. Cassidy and R. B. LePage, *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967).

as a source of social amusement to such of his friends as of a literary turn."[29] Sharpe and his companions no doubt amused themselves with the subtleties of their own language; they also learnt in short order that the better form of communication to advance their plan and to carry out serious business is indeed their own tongue.

Ironically, the English slavers from whose terror Sharpe sought freedom for his own people took an awfully long time to appreciate their own language. Just over two hundred years before Sharpe's trial, a few Christians in England attempted to translate God's word into their own language, but Church officials and the Oxon and Contab academicians vehemently opposed the thought of an English Bible.[30] Reflecting on this period of Anglo- history McGrath observes:

> It is not generally realized that the languages of the elite in English society in the early fourteenth century were French and Latin. English was seen as the language of the peasants, incapable of expressing anything other than the crudest and most basic of matters. . . . How could such a barbaric language do justice to such sophisticated matters as philosophy or religion? To translate the Bible from its noble and ancient languages into English was seen as a pointless act of debasement.[31]

It appears as if Jamaicans have internalized the self-hate of their former overlords, because what took place in England centuries ago is now happening to Sharpe's first language. It also seems as though we have forgotten that, as Davis has pointed out, "Cultural emancipation [also] involves the matter of popular language." He continues,

> Caribbean history is full of examples of those who exploited the masses of the people because of their persuasive speech and charismatic flair. . . . The presumed inability on the part of the lower classes to "speak properly" incessantly redounded to their own frustration and social rejection, and certainly barred them from assuming many rights and privileges which "better speech" afforded. . . . Emancipation [then] from below also involves a determination to educate the people of the Caribbean not for domestication but freedom and development.[32]

Further evidence of self-abnegation may be seen in the vigorous debate over the not-so recently published Jamaican New Testament.[33] Most of the responses before the project was complete expressed the view that it is ill-conceived, and, if carried through, it will be a colossal waste of time and money. A few writers,

---

[29] Suzanne Romaine, *Pidgin and Creole Languages* (London: Longman, 1988), 7.

[30] Not so in Jamaica. It is more the middle and upper-class, and successive governments lacking the political will to promote such a project.

[31] Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture (*New York: Doubleday, 2001), 24 .

[32] Kortright Davis, *Emancipation Still Comin': Explorations in Caribbean Emancipatory Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 136-137 .

[33] Bertram Gayle, et al. *Di Jamiekan Nyuu Testiment* (Kingston: Bible Society of the West Indies, 2012).

mostly academicians, have come out in support of the idea, pointing out that a possible reason for the poor performance of many of our young people in their English examinations is the failure of the education system to recognize ToSS as the mother tongue of the majority. They also pointed out that in other countries like Haiti and the ABC islands where the languages of the majority are duly recognized, the learning of French and Dutch, colonial languages like English, is made far easier. One seemingly strong argument for the continued marginalization of the Jamaican language is the ubiquitous character of English and the contrasting narrow confines of ToSS. But as French teacher turned theologian has pointed out:

> French emerged out of the modification of the language of invading forces. In this case, that language was called Vulgar Latin because it was the language of the people – the average Roman citizen. Interestingly in France, it was regarded as the language of the educated. . . . According to [experts], Modern French developed from Old French which developed from Vulgar Latin and other linguistic influences, and Vulgar Latin developed from Classical Latin which developed from Archaic Latin.[34]

Some prominent individuals who have spoken or written on what is now becoming the ToSS-English impasse include a former prime minister. He is a representative of those who strongly feel that the promotion of the Jamaican language at this time may be counter-productive to the proper grasp of English, the official language since independence. But perhaps the most worthwhile contribution to the debate so far is that of Gosnell L. Yorke, a Caribbean scholar who served as NT professor at the University of Kwazulu-Natal as well as professor extraordinarius at the University of South Africa. Dr Yorke spent about fifteen years in Africa and was for ten years a Bible translation consultant with the United Bible Societies. Professor Yorke informs us that our region is witnessing what he calls a linguistic phenomenon in that the four European languages that were imperially imposed on our African ancestors are now undergoing a process of creolisation. What he means by this is that the early slave settlers of Jamaica, for example, "were forced to creatively adapt" the language of their European overlords and their adaptation blended with the various west African languages to produce before long a new authentic language we now call Jamaican Creole (ToSS). Professor York goes on to say that:

> Since the various Bible translation agencies in the Caribbean are driven by the defensible conviction that all 6,000 or so languages currently spoken in the world at large are equal, that English is only one of them, and that God does speak most compellingly to each of us in our mother tongue or heart language . . . it is not at all surprising that the Haitian Bible Society, the Bible Society of the

---

[34] E. Christine Campbell, "Language and Identity in Caribbean Theology," in *A Karios Moment in Caribbean Theology*, edited J. Richard Middleton and G. Lincoln Roper (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 25.

> Netherlands Antilles, and the Bible Society in the Eastern Caribbean have already translated and published . . . the complete Bible or at least the New Testament in some of the Caribbean creoles.[35]

We are informed as well that ongoing translation work is also going on in Belize and the French Antilles—and, further afield, in many parts of Africa.

A few contributors to the debate, some as far as Canada and the USA who are largely in disagreement with the likes of professor Yorke, appear to say that TToSS only has entertainment value.[36] For instance, where else in the world do they go to a shop and order *wan drinks and two patti*! Or where on earth do competent speakers of their mother tongue drop their aches at *Arba* Street and pick it up at *Heast* Street? However, all this does not do away with the notion that Jamaican is indeed a language in its own right.

Again we cite professor Yorke's insightful comments on the matter:

> After all, Jesus himself is known to have spoken Aramaic, his own mother tongue, and not only Hebrew, the language of the Jewish Scriptures but (and if He did at all) also the two dominant languages of his day, namely, the commonly-spoken Greek which was made possible by the colonial exploits and exploitation of Alexander, the Great, who lived and died before His time or Latin, the official language of the conquering Romans-those who ruled the world when He both lived and died; when He uttered His life-changing words and performed His life-changing works. And if Jesus showed no hesitation in embracing Aramaic, His mother tongue, in His conduct and conversation with others around Him, including when dying on the cross, then why should one hesitate do so in Jamaican-if that just happens to be one's mother tongue?[37]

In John 3:7 this same Jesus is reported to have said to Nicodemus: "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again". This, of course, is the King James translation of a fairly well known text. What apparently is not fairly well known is that modern English has not really improved on this rendition due to the fact that its pronominal system is sometimes quite vague, especially in the second

---

[35] Cited in *Acts: A Contextual Commentary* (Kingston: EMI, 2020), 240.

[36] Ironically, linguistic prejudice does not discriminate, as the following admission demonstrates: "I must, in common justice, confess here that for many years I had viewed the Greek of the New Testament with a rather snobbish disdain. I had read the best of Classical Greek both at school and Cambridge for over ten years. To come down to the *Koine* of the first century A.D. seemed, I have sometimes remarked rather uncharitably, like reading Shakespeare for some years and turning to the Vicar's letter in the Parish Magazine! But I think now that I was wrong: I can see that the expression of the Word of God *in ordinary workaday language is all a piece with God's incredible humility in becoming Man in Jesus Christ*. And, further, the language itself is not as pedestrian as I had at first supposed" (J. B. Phillips, *Ring of Truth: A Translator's Testimony* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1967], 18; italics mine). If Koine Greek was the "ordinary workaday language" of the First Century, ToSS is perhaps the supreme example of such in the Twenty-first. As donor and receptor languages, they have combined well to give us the Jamaican New Testament.

[37] Cited in Samantha Mosha, .*New Testament Theology: Identity & I-deology* (Kingston, JA: EMI, 2019), 35.

person. Therefore, one finds the same verse translated in the New International Version (NIV) as: "You should not be surprised at my saying, You must be born again." In the King James language of 500 years ago the distinction between 'you' singular and 'you' plural is clearly marked by the pronouns 'thee' and 'ye' respectively; but in the NIV there is no such clarity, except for a footnote to the effect that the second occurrence of the pronoun in question is plural.[38]

This is not the fault of the NIV translators; it is the weakness of the Queen's English in modern dress. Other Europeans languages such as German, French and Spanish, can make the distinction and so bring a better understanding to the verse. There is still another language that says it better than modern English: *No badda friten seh mi a tel yu dis: unu haffi bawn agen!'* The same insight can be gained from passages like Genesis 3:1 and Luke 22:31.

Interestingly, ToSS is quite challenged when translating contexts where the Greek emphatic pronoun *egō* ('I') is used. The pronominal system of ToSS routinely glosses 'I' as *mi* (see Fig. 1 below). In my judgement this is quite okay when the verb is not accompanied by *egō*. English encounters the same difficulty. So how then should this type of emphasis be reflected in the Jamaican language? This is where enrichments from the language of Rastafari (Dread Talk—a post-Sharpe phenomenon) may prove helpful.

Figure 1: Pronominal System of ToSS (with English glosses in parenthesis)

Singular	Plural
1st *Mi* (I)	*Wi* (we/us)
2nd *Yu* (you)[39]	*Unu* (you)
3rd *Im /Shi / i* (he/she/it)	*Dem* (they)

The first work to attempt a comprehensive analysis of the language of Rastas was done by Joshua Peart, adjunct professor of education at the Jamaica Theological Seminary. His stated objective was to investigate the relationship among the English language, Jamaican Creole, and what he called 'Dread Talk.'[40] After briefly outlining the evolution of Rastafari, Peart stated that "It is uncertain how long after the inception of the movement this distinct way of speaking (sc. Dread Talk) developed,

---

[38] Cf. John 3:11.

[39] *A onggl Jiizas wan kyan siev piipl, ... Nobadi els iina di uol worl kyaahn siev yu.* (It is Jesus alone who is able to save people … No one else in the whole world can save *you*); Here—that is, the last word in JNT—the Greek is first person plural, and last word. (καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐν ἄλλῳ οὐδενὶ ἡ σωτηρία, οὐδὲ γὰρ ὄνομά ἐστιν ἕτερον ὑπὸ τὸν οὐρανὸν τὸ δεδομένον ἐν ἀνθρώποις ἐν ᾧ δεῖ σωθῆναι *ἡμᾶς*. Emphasis added

[40] Joshua F. Peart, "A Caribbean Study on Dread Talk." Paper, Linguistics Dept., UWI, 1977.

just as it is difficult to say at precisely what time French or Spanish began to break away from Latin, or what time they became separate languages."

In exploring the relation between ToSS and Dread Talk, Peart observed that the two linguistic phenomena are so close that the line between them is "blurred in some areas . . . and much sharper in others. . . . The genetic relationship between 'Dread Talk' and English [however] is much more definable."[41] In seeking to answer the question as to whether Dread Talk is a language or a dialect, Peart concluded that it is a dialect of ToSS with the caveat that Rastas do not use pure Jamaican "because it has been influenced by imperialist/Colonialist mentality and subjugation."   The unique feature of Dread Talk, Peart, further observed, is its creative employment of the pronominal 'I'.[42]

Less than a decade later, Pollard published a programmatic and linguistically sophisticated paper as part of a symposium on RastafarI. Her focus was upon the lexical items of Dread Talk, particularly the distinctive pronominal form. Pollard classifies Dread Talk under three main categories. In the first category we have "known items bear[ing] new meanings," for example, the term "forward" becomes in Dread Talk "leave" in the sentence, "I man a faawod." The second category, observes Pollard, encompasses "Words that bear the weight of their phonological implications with some explanations." For instance, the English "oppress" morphs into "downpress," as in the sentence "Weda di man did blak ar wait an im dounpress me now iz stil siem ai a bon/whether the man is black or white, and he oppresses me I am still the one suffering." [43] Pollard summarizes the third category thus:

> The pronoun "I" of SJE [Standard Jamaican English] gives place to /mi/ in JC [Jamaican Creole] and is glossed as I, my, mine, me, according to the context. It is this "I" of SJE that has become the predominant sound in Rastafarian language though its implications are far more extensive than the simple SJE pronoun "I" could ever bear.[44]

McFarlane's contribution is an attempt to analyze the distinctive pronominal against the backdrop of popular Jamaican culture, loosely within the framework of Western philosophy. "Rasta I-words," asserts McFarlane, "form a well-knit semantic and lexical family structure."[45]   Within this linguistic framework Rastas are able to simultaneously resist the culture of subservience imposed on those of African descent as well as affirm their new epistemological paradigm in contradistinction to

---

[41] Ibid., 5-6.

[42] Ibid., 10-14.

[43] Velma Pollard, "The Speech of the Rastafarians in Jamaica." In *Caribbean Quarterly Monograph: Rastafari*. (Kingston: University of the West Indies, 1985), 34.

[44] Ibid., 35ff.

[45] A. McFarlane, "The Epistemological Significance of 'I-n-I' as a Response to Quashie and Anancyism in Jamaican Culture." In *Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*. Edited by Nathaniel Murrell, William David Spencer and Adrian Anthony McFarlane (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 107.

that of a dominant Western brand.[46] The Rasta also uses the pronouns of ToSS but with the following exceptions: for the first person singular it is I or I-n-I or I-man.[47] For the first person plural I-n-I is used almost exclusively.[48] Thus the recent rendering of Matthew 5:21-22 in ToSS is like this:

> *Unu nuo se dem did tel unu faada dem se, 'no kil nobadi' an anibadi we kil smabadi, dem ago a kuot-ous an di joj ago se dem gilti an rait dem aaf .Bot ier wa mi* [egō][49] *a se, jos beks wid unu breda ar unu sista, an unu afi go a kuot, an did joj ago se unu gilti an rait unu aaf!*

The 2011 edition of the NIV reads:

> You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I [*egō*] tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. (NIV 5: 21-22).

Whereas the weakness of the NIV is the failure to reveal the plural character of the second person pronoun, that of ToSS is its inability to highlight the emphatic first person, *egō*. There is seldom a perfect translation; this notwithstanding, there is no doubt in my mind that Dread Talk[50] at this point makes a valuable linguistic contribution to Jamaica Talk (a.k.a. ToSS). At this point a linguistic model may be employed to explore the question of the distinctive function of I-n-I. "We employ language in thinking (cognitive function), to give injunctions (imperative function), to make emotional gestures (emotive function), to maintain inter-personal relationships (integrative function) and to effect a change in someone else's status (performative function)."[51]   Obviously, the Rasta employs the subject pronoun

---

[46] Ibid., 108-119.

[47] Richard Allsopp, *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 30; Yasus Afari, *Overstanding Rastafari: Jamaica's Gift to the World* (Kingston: Senya-Cum, 2007), 114.

[48] According to Bruce J. Malina, "Understanding New Testament Persons" in *The Social Sciences and New Testament Interpretation.* ed.., Richard Rohrbaugh (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson. 1996), 44-45, " Even though all people on planet earth, as far as we can verify, use the word 'I' and its equivalents, the meanings invested in that word in the various social systems of the world are often radically different. . . . The way people deal with the self can be plotted on a line whose extreme axes are individualism (awareness of a unique and totally independent 'I') on the one hand, and collectivism (awareness of an 'I' that has nearly everything in common with the kinship group and its spin-offs)." This is further explored in *Messianic 'I' and Rastafari in NT Dialogue: BioNarratives, The Apocalypse and Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Plymouth: UPA, 2010).

[49] Cf. Liam Martin's rendition (*De Hola Biebl: A I-aric Vosian,* vol. 4 [NP: CreateSpace, 2010]): "But I-man seh to de-I . . ." He might have missed the plural form of the second pronoun, or just chosen not to render it as such.

[50] Rex Nettleford (in Joseph Owens, *Dread: The Rastafarians of Jamaica* [Kingston: Sangster, 1976], iv) was convinced that "The Rastafarians are inventing a language, using existing elements to be sure, but creating a means of communication that would faithfully reflect the specificities of their experience and perception of self, life and the world . . . [it is a] relexification of African forms into the language of the [slave] masters."

[51] D. V. Palmer, "Pauline *Charismata* and the Twenty-First Century" *Binah* 1(1996), 20.

cognitively, emotively and possibly in the last sense as well. What some may find surprising is the imperative function, perhaps best described in the following analysis:

> The I-words of Rasta talk, though stated in the indicative mood, are guided by the form and principle of the imperative "I". . . . The power of the "I" lies in its ability to command the self; its reflexiveness is its strength, and its purpose is to create a new identity and meaning for the speaker [performative function?]. Rastas take instructions from no one outside of themselves . . . all commands come from within unless issued by a Rasta to "an unbeliever". So even though it sounds odd to have the imperative in the first person it makes "Rasta sense" to be directed by the I, buttressed by I-n-I.[52]

This function of the 'I' resembles the Hebrew cohortative which "lays stress on the determination underlying the action, and the personal interest in it."[53]

If the African influence on TToSS is already established, one wonders if the Semitic influence on Dread Talk (the cognate of TToSS) is not somehow intruding into the peculiar imperative 'I.'[54] Whether we acknowledge the contribution of Dread Talk or not, we need to find ways to talk to and with our people--every stratum of our people, in such a way as to maintain their dignity while ensuring the advance and expansion of their liberty. Caribbean theologians and other church leaders have tried their best to communicate the gospel and its implications for the lived-experience of the people of God as they seek to heed the call of Sitahal that theology in the region must be "of, for, by and with the *people*" as a matter of priority.[55]

To ignore the language(s) of the majority in our theologizing while continuing to privilege the tongue of the minority is a recipe for stagnation at best and a courting of God-talk disaster at worst. In the case of Jamaica, both the official language and TToSS are needed for meaningful progress in the educational[56] and theological arenas going forward. The time for me to say, "I-n-I used to be indecisive, now I'm not so sure" is at an end.[57]

---

[52] McFarlane, "The Epistemological Significance of I-n-I,"108.

53 Emil Kautzsch, et al. *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), 319.

[54]Amharic scholar Peter Cotterell (*Language and the Christian: A Guide to Communication and Understanding* [London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1978], 152), points out that pronominal 'I' is one of the most stable linguistic elements; it is numbered among a "basic list of words which are known to be change-resistant. . . . That is to say, after the lapse of one thousand years any language would be found to have 86 per cent of these words retained without essential change." For more on this, see D.V. Palmer, *Pronominal 'I', Rastafari and the Lexicon of the New Testament* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2008).

[55] Harold Sitahal, "Caribbean Theology" *Caribbean Journal of Religious Studies* 14 (1999*)*, 9.

[56] See Ronnie Thwaites on the linguistic challenges of PEP, *The Daily Gleaner*, October 9, 2018.

[57] Here we register hearty agreement with Kortright Davis ("Two Caribbean Theologies of Freedom: The Romney Moseley- Kortright Davis Debate" *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* [1993], 36) that if indeed "Columbus is a metaphor for the Caribbean endemic disease, then Caribbean theology has to struggle to be a part of the therapeutic process that throws Columbus into remission by firm and appropriate emancipatory

Summary and Conclusion

Social re-engineering begins with a vision of a better future, and a better future for Jamaica in particular and the wider Caribbean in general stand to benefit from the recognition of the great potential bilingualism presents.[58] This we believe is what liberator Sam Sharpe and company realized and actualized; so did Moses in north-east Africa; so did Jesus in south-west Asia.[59] Some of them died and others thought that was the end of them. That was exactly what they thought of Sharpe's Lord and Master as well. But he rose from the dead. Sharpe has not done so yet, but what he envisioned in terms of a society minus slavery is (*mutatis mutandis*) our reality. One of his tools used to craft an alternative society and promote human flourishing was the uncanny ability to subversely communicate with the oppressor as well as to conversely talk with the oppressed to eventually ensure the liberty of both. Campbell says it better than I:

> [T]he fight for Emancipation, the fight for Independence still continues. This is a fight against mental slavery. It was easy to identify the injustice of physical enslavement. It has been easy to identify the injustice of economic exploitation. It has been easy to identify the injustice of social stratification and political victimization. But, it has not been so easy for the oppressed to be conscious of the bonds of 'identity indoctrination' and its relationship to the other forms of bondage.   Alexander the Great understood this relationship. He recognized that to truly conquer the world, he had to Hellenize it. And, Greek culture did become the world's culture.

Campbell continues:

> An important element in his battle on the cultural front was the philosophers, whose weapons were words – potent weapons indeed, as language is "a medium for projecting social identities". . . . Caribbean reality needs reconstruction. It was constructed with language as a tool of oppression. This has led to a loss of identity – a loss of our true identity. It has led us to demean what is uniquely ours while we embrace what is not ours nor can be – the life and identity of our oppressors. This is part of the reality that we need to deconstruct before reconstruction can take place.

---

imperatives and practical guidelines. Or else it will remain just a miserable component of the same disease."

[58] Bearing in mind that the "central and enduring character of Christian history is the rendering of God's eternal counsels into to terms of everyday speech." Lamin Sanneh, "Bible Translation and Ethnic Mobilization in Africa," [157-84] in *New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium*, edited by Fernando F. Segovia et al. (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 161.

[59] Two extraordinary individuals not unfamiliar with oppression; the latter, we believe, was fluent in Aramaic, Greek, and possibly, Latin.

She concludes that "Language has been a tool of exploitation. Now it is time to reclaim this gift from God by using it as a tool of liberation. We must, therefore, listen to the arguments of the linguists and acknowledge the worth of [ToSS]."[60] We have to agree then with another luminary from afar that "we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free."[61] Emancipation from mental slavery is not only possible but achievable. We have the tools from below to achieve it and the grace from above to live it—a lesson from the man they called Daddy Sharpe.

---

[60] E. Christine Campbell, "Language and Identity in Caribbean Theology". "This is a world," notes Jo-Anne Ferreira ("Language Matters: The Heritage Languages of T&T," *UWI STAN* [April-June 2012], 39), "where bi-/multi-lingualism is normally, valued and encouraged by many countries . . ." including Trinidad and Tobago where bilingualism and bidialectism "are recognized in the 2010 Language and Language Policy," a move that Jamaica in particular should consider; cf. *Human Rights & Human Development Issues in Jamaica* (Kingston: UNDP/Arawak, 2003), 126 ['Universal Declaration of Human Rights,' Article 2].

[61] Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Boston: Bay Back, 1995), 624.