

Feature Article: JAF3406

SPIRITUALITY IN MODERN HIP HOP: The Theology of Kendrick Lamar and Chance the Rapper

by Vocab Malone

This article first appeared in the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, volume 40, number 06 (2017). For further information or to subscribe to the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL go to: <http://www.equip.org/christian-research-journal/>

Has secular hip hop “gone religious”? One platinum-selling artist gives performances on high-profile stages that resemble worship services. Another critically acclaimed rapper includes on his album interludes with expositions from Deuteronomy. This small trend is a surprise. In the ‘90s, hip hop music was generally anti-Christian (see: Ras Kass). Paris, Public Enemy, and X-Clan advocated militant nationalism. Wu-Tang, Brand Nubian, Rakim, Dignity Planets, and Poor Righteous Teachers espoused Five Percent beliefs (a Nation of Islam sect). Nas and Jay-Z employed semiblasphemous statements and imagery.¹

Hip hop music has often been “spiritually minded,”² but recent times saw less spiritual content. Hedonism and nihilism permeate; hip hop’s current stars are preoccupied with girls, gold, and a good time. Yet, there are anomalies: twenty-four-year-old Chance the Rapper and thirty-year-old Kendrick Lamar.

KENDRICK LAMAR

Kendrick Lamar’s *Damn* sold 603,000 copies its first week; his third Billboard #1 release. Kendrick is an incredible lyricist who rose to the top via creativity, talent, and raw authenticity. He is the thinking Millennial’s rapper. His work lends itself to theological analysis.³ Amazingly, *The Atlantic* states his new album’s “larger target” is “inescapable human sin.”⁴ By one count, Kendrick references Christianity an average of seventy-four times per full-length album.⁵ His certified platinum major label debut, *good kid, m.A.A.d city*, begins with a prayer:

Lord God / I come to you a sinner / And I humbly repent for my
sins / I believe that Jesus is Lord / I believe that you raised him
from the dead / I will ask that Jesus will come to my life / And
be my Lord and Savior / I receive Jesus to take control of my
life / And that I may live for him from this day forth / Thank

you Lord Jesus for saving me with your precious blood / In
Jesus' name, Amen

The track immediately after Kendrick's "Sinner's Prayer" intro details a lust-filled relationship with "Sherane." Moral vacillation is characteristic of Kendrick's work. Kendrick calls out his own double mindedness on "For Sale?": "I loosely heard prayers on your first album truly / Lucy don't mind, cause at the end of the day you'll pursue me." Lucy, short for Lucifer, is a stand-in for Satan. The implication: the Devil doesn't mind if Kendrick Lamar gives a shout out to God, because Kendrick will ultimately follow a path of temptation and sin. The song ends with Kendrick musing, "The evils of Lucy was all around me, so I went running for answers." The main question: "Why God, why God, do I gotta suffer?" Kendrick asks on "Fear": "Pain in my heart, carry burdens full of struggle / why God, why God, do I gotta bleed? / every stone thrown at you, resting at my feet / why God, why God, do I gotta suffer? / earth is no more, once you burn this mother [expletive]."

Damn indicates where Kendrick is now looking for answers: Black Hebrew Israelism. Kendrick's new project moves from a mild form of Christian-themed spirituality to a mild form of Black Hebrew Israelite-themed spirituality: "I'm not about a religion / I'm an Israelite, don't call me black no mo," raps Kendrick on "YAH."⁶

The Black Hebrew Israelite thesis is that descendants of slaves now living in the Western Hemisphere are the true biblical Israelites.⁷ The movement is a theodicy (an explanation for the reality of evil in light of a good God) at its core, teaching that the low condition of African Americans is a direct result of failing to keep Old Testament laws. The title to Kendrick's new album is based on a Black Hebrew Israelite distinctive: black and brown people in the United States are currently cursed or *damned by God*.⁸ Kendrick echoes this: "Deuteronomy say that we'd all be cursed" — as does his cousin Carl Duckworth, who makes several teaching cameos.⁹ Drawing from Amos, Carl says, "Verse two says you only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. So until we come back to these commandments, until *you* come back to these commandments, we gonna feel this way, we're gonna be under this curse. Because he said he's gonna punish us. The so-called Blacks, Hispanics, and Native American Indians are the true children of Israel."

Some media outlets noticed Kendrick's shift into Hebrew Israelism.¹⁰ This shift from Christianity-lite to Hebrew Israelism-lite should have a chastening effect on Christians who loudly cheered for Kendrick's past work. It *is* refreshing to see an artist grapple with the big issues; yet, in light of Ephesians 5:11–12, we are to "take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret" (ESV). Kendrick's music is filled with violence, illicit sex, misogyny, substance abuse, foul language, explicit imagery, braggadocio, sacrilege, and a celebration of shameful things. Sadly, the Christian observer is left with the harrowing feeling Kendrick's journey was headed somewhere hopeful, but then he took an extreme wrong turn. There is a sense of lost possibilities with *Damn*.

CHANCE THE RAPPER

Chicago-based Chance the Rapper is independent — not signed to a major label. A big part of his listenership comes from streaming (as opposed to physical units or downloads). He is an artist for a digital age, a DIY age, and an age where artists can control their content and reach audiences in unconventional, yet successful, ways. Chance was nominated for *seven* Grammys in 2017. There, he performed Chris Tomlin's "How Great." Some commentators called his Grammy performance worshipful (one said he "took it to church") and another said his album was a "gospel rap masterpiece."¹¹

Chance frequently employs a gospel-singing "church sound" with the accompanying themes of blessings and praise. When Chance appeared on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* to perform "Blessings," he brought a gospel choir — robes and all — to enhance the experience.¹² Ironically, at a time when some Christian rappers are reluctant to be branded a "Christian rapper," Chance boldly calls himself a Christian rapper: "I don't make Christian rap, but I am a Christian rapper. When I was going out and trying to fully give glory to God, in my setting, I feared that people would be dismissive of it, like, 'This is Christian rap, I'm not trying to hear it.' But it's the total opposite: People were very accepting of it."¹³ Chance's Christian influence can be on the nose, as in "Acid Rain": "I am a new man / I am sanctified / Ohh, I am holy / I have been baptized / I have been born again." Other times, it is playful, as in "Everybody's Something": "Why God phone die, every time that I call on him? / if his Son had a Twitter, wonder if I would follow him?"

Similar to Kendrick Lamar, Chance's music is a mismatch affair, with sex and foul language aplenty. At a lecture at Harvard, Chance rationalized his use of the B-word (he has a song called, "You a B****").¹⁴ This brings to mind James 3:10: "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so" (ESV). One song asks, "Are you ready for your miracle, are you ready for your blessing," while another song says, "You a b****." In 2016, Chance was featured on "Church" with BJ the Chicago Kid.¹⁵ The thrust is in the chorus: "She say wanna drink, do drugs and have sex tonight / but I got church in the morning, church in the morning."¹⁶ Living in both worlds is part of Chance's brand.

Truth is damaged when we embrace open contradiction. Lack of integrity and naked hypocrisy should never be encouraged. In some ways, hip hop culture embraces contradiction: artists switch from shooting to praying in a matter of minutes (see: DMX). An artist extols the virtues of motherhood in one line and tosses out misogynistic slurs in the next (see: Tupac). A rapper who is proudly drug-free on one album comes out as a "weed head" on his next album (see: Dr. Dre). An artist who excoriates the wealthy for exploiting others sees no problem boasting about exploiting others to gain wealth (see: Ice Cube). Christians should be aware of this and set a different example (Phil. 2:15–16).

The popularity of secular (but religiously inclined) rappers Kendrick Lamar and Chance the Rapper has brought new attention to theological concepts in hip hop. Ultimately, the hypocritical and sin-glorifying aspects of their music leaves the listener unfulfilled. If hip hop fans desire deeper spiritual content, we can point them to gospel-centered hip hop artists — and the Christ they represent — instead. If you think Kendrick Lamar has a unique style, check out Nobigdyl's *Tree Tops*. If you want the real thing when it comes to an urban gospel choir sound, check out Kirk Franklin's *Hello Fear*. If you can't get enough of Chicago style hip hop, check out Gemstones' *Blind Elephant*. Worship infused lyrics? Beautiful Eulogy's *Worthy*. Socially conscious lyrics? Sho Baraka's *The Narrative*. The aforementioned are not knock-offs or copycats, but skilled artists in their own right.

It is intriguing to see the rise of Kendrick Lamar and Chance the Rapper, two artists who confusingly combine the profane and the spiritual. Again, this should not be. True, it can be enlightening to hear what artists such as Chance and Kendrick say on social and spiritual issues. Nonetheless, the embrace of hypocrisy is not something Christians should applaud or excuse. Perhaps we can use *some* aspects of their work as "touch points" for evangelism, all the while critiquing the hypocritical, anemic, and ungodly components in their art.

Although Christian listeners should be cautious and careful, we also should be discerning and empathetic.¹⁷ For example, we should recognize that both Kendrick and Chance mull over their struggles with temptation and sin. There is an authentic admission of failure in their lyrics, and this is laudable (Ps. 34 and 51). Kendrick especially proclaims a desire for justice to prevail as he witnesses injustice after injustice all around him — yet this desire is left unfulfilled. Both these themes — confession of personal sin and a desire for justice to prevail — are gospel issues. The church has a perfect opportunity creatively to declare to a chaotic world that Jesus Christ alone is the Savior who wipes away the guilt of sin and gives power to overcome temptation (Rom. 5–6). His eternal Kingdom is a Kingdom where permanent shalom and true justice will reign.¹⁸ *That* truth is a message worthy to be proclaimed by *all* artists of *all* genres.¹⁹

Vocab Malone, MA, is a doctoral student studying Black Hebrew Israelism. His focus involves urban apologetics and worldview analysis of pop culture (sci-fi and superheroes). He is the author of *Barack Obama vs the Black Hebrew Israelites: Introduction to the Beliefs and Practices of West Hebrew Israelism* (Thureos/Lionhouse, 2017).

NOTES

1. Kanye West has done the same. Kanye's 2004 hit "Jesus Walks" was superficially honorific toward Christ. In 2013, Kanye released a song named "I Am a God."
2. KRS-One dropped an album with this exact title in 2002.
3. Ralph Bristout, "The Book of K. Dot: Exploring the Religious Themes Tucked in Kendrick Lamar's Catalog," *Revolt*, <https://revolt.tv/stories/2017/04/13/book-dot-exploring-religious-themes-tucked-kendrick-lamars-catalog-07008acdf9>.

4. Spencer Kornhaber, "Kendrick Lamar's Complicated Political Score Settling," *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/04/kendrick-lamar-damn-politics-fox-trump/523059>.
5. "Kendrick Lamar, By the Numbers," *Complex Music*, April 7, 2017, <http://www.complex.com/music/2017/04/kendrick-lamar-by-the-numbers>.
6. Kendrick now uses "Yah" for God and "Yeshua" for Jesus. Previously, Kendrick was fine with "God" and "Jesus." As he moves from being influenced by Christian concepts to Black Hebrew Israelite concepts, it follows he would share the Black Hebrew Israelite tendency to use some form of Hebrew.
7. The *Christian Research Journal* covered this phenomenon in an excellent article by Jimmy Butts: "The Origin and Insufficiency of the Black Hebrew Israelite Movement," 39,4 (2016), available at <http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAF4394.pdf>.
8. For a standard "Hebrew Israelite" presentation, see Rudolph R. Windsor, *The Valley of the Dry Bones* (Atlanta: Windsor's Golden Series), 1986.
9. Kendrick's cousin, Carl Duckworth, is closely affiliated with a Black Hebrew Israelite group known as Israel United in Christ (IUIIC). Sam Kestenbaum, "EXPLAINED: Rapper Kendrick Lamar's Hebrew Israelite Connection," *The Forward*, <http://forward.com/news/369749/explained-rapper-kendrick-lamars-hebrew-israelite-connection>.
10. Sam Kestenbaum, "Kendrick Lamar Goes Hebrew Israelite on 'Damn,'" *The Forward*, April 14, 2017, <http://forward.com/fast-forward/369068/is-rapper-kendrick-lamar-a-hebrew-israelite-like-amare-stoudemire>, accessed April 20, 2017.
11. Aisha Harris, "Chance the Rapper Took the Grammys to Church with His Joyous Gospel-Rap Medley," http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2017/02/13/chance_the_rapper_s_took_the_grammys_to_church_with_joyful_performance_video.html.
12. "Watch Chance the Rapper Bring out a Gospel Choir on Jimmy Fallon," <http://www.highsnobiety.com/2016/10/04/chance-the-rapper-jimmy-fallon>.
13. "Chance the Rapper Opens Up about What It's Like to Challenge Kanye West," *Teen Vogue*, <http://www.teenvogue.com/story/chance-the-rapper-jordan-peepe-cover-interview-music-issue-creativity>.
14. Elias Leight, "All the Best Quotes from Chance the Rapper's Lecture at Harvard," *Fader Mag*, <http://www.thefader.com/2015/05/06/chance-the-rapper-harvard-lecture>.
15. BJ opines on religion in rap: "It's like there's no rules anymore. It's like, if you love the music and it feels right, they don't care if it says 'God' in it"; <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/music/ct-rap-music-gospel-ae-0605-20160602-story.html>.
16. Another example is "Sunday Candy." The verse celebrates Chance's Grandma while the chorus turns communion and Sunday service into a sexually explicit metaphor.
17. An excellent example is Shai Linne's, "Are Chance the Rapper and 'Coloring Book' Christian Hip-Hop?" Shai Linne, <http://rapzilla.com/rz/features/15128-shai-linne-are-chance-the-rapper-coloring-book-christian-hip-hop?showall=1&limitstart=>.
18. See Luke 4:16–20 and Rev. 21:4. 19 Thank you to Pastor Eric.