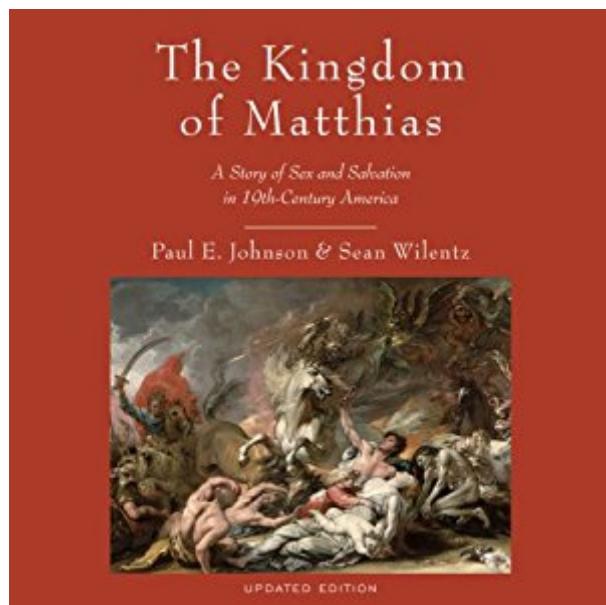


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The Kingdom Of Matthias: A Story Of Sex And Salvation In 19th-Century America



Synopsis

In the autumn of 1834, New York City was awash with rumors of a strange religious cult operating nearby, centered around a mysterious, self-styled prophet named Matthias. It was said that Matthias the Prophet was stealing money from one of his followers; then came reports of lascivious sexual relations, based on odd teachings of matched spirits, apostolic priesthoods, and the inferiority of women. At its climax, the rumors transformed into legal charges, as the Prophet was arrested for the murder of a once highly regarded Christian gentleman who had fallen under his sway. By the time the story played out, it became one of the nation's first penny-press sensations, casting a peculiar but revealing light on the sexual and spiritual tensions of the day. In *The Kingdom of Matthias*, the distinguished historians Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz brilliantly recapture this forgotten story, imbuing their richly researched account with the dramatic force of a novel. In this book, the strange tale of Matthias the Prophet provides a fascinating window into the turbulent movements of the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening - movements which swept up great numbers of evangelical Americans and gave rise to new sects like the Mormons. Into this teeming environment walked a down-and-out carpenter named Robert Matthews, who announced himself as Matthias, prophet of the God of the Jews. His hypnotic spell drew in a cast of unforgettable characters - the meekly devout businessman Elijah Pierson, who once tried to raise his late wife from the dead; the young attractive Christian couple, Benjamin Folger and his wife, Ann (who seduced the woman-hating Prophet); and the shrewd ex-slave Isabella Van Wagenen, regarded by some as "the most wicked of the wicked". None was more colorful than the Prophet himself, a bearded, thundering tyrant who gathered his followers into an absolutist household, using their money to buy an elaborate, eccentric wardrobe, and reordering their marital relations. By the time the tensions within the kingdom exploded into a clash with the law, Matthias had become a national scandal. In the hands of Johnson and Wilentz, the strange tale of the Prophet and his kingdom comes vividly to life, recalling scenes from recent experiences at Jonestown and Waco. They also reveal much about a formative period in American history, showing the connections among rapid economic change, sex and race relations, politics, popular culture, and the rich varieties of American religious experience.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In this work, Paul Johnson has taken a relatively small and unknown event and used it to illustrate not only an interesting event but also an interesting perspective on the Burned-Over District as a whole. It touches on everything from sexual corruption to radical doctrinal innovations. The Burned-Over district saw the beginning of numerous religious movements such as Mormonism, Adventism, Christian Scientists, numerous smaller religions that did not survive, and even significant political movements such as Antimasonry. This book is the story of one of those movements. The prologue introduces Matthias as he went to Kirtland to visit with the Mormon Prophet, Joseph Smith. While this event occurred near the end of Matthias' activity, it is obvious that he stole many of his ideas from Joseph Smith. Matthias initiated the practice of the washing of feet which was common to both the followers of Joseph Smith and Ellen White. He also believed that the truth of the Gospel had fallen from the earth shortly after the time of Christ another Mormon belief. In addition, he had a sword which he claimed was ancient similar to Smith's sword of Laban, as well as naming the Priesthood after the order of Melchezidek. Likewise, his early mentor Mordecai Noah taught that the Indians were actually a branch of the Israelites which is a central idea found in the Book of Mormon. All of these ideas came out before 1830 when Matthias began his activity. The most humorous part of this history is the anecdotes that relate to Matthias' enemies trying to shave off his beard. Johnson has done an excellent job condensing all the most relevant information in this short work. The Kingdom of Matthias is an enjoyable read and a must for anyone interested in this interesting period in American religious history.

This is an amazing book - a true story about a long-forgotten part of our religious culture. Although the author is, quite frankly, terribly wrong at some significant points (for example, he truly doesn't

comprehend the nature or the specific delineations and elements of Calvinism, which provides a pivotal vantage point in a portion of his telling of the story), it is generally an important work in understanding the cults that arose in the Northeastern part of America in the 19th century. With the understanding that the author does not have the market cornered on knowing Calvinism, and therefore his opinions are highly suspect any time Calvinism is mentioned - even obliquely - it is still an excellent work, so long as you know that the author's presuppositional commitments in that area are likely wrong, or mistaken, or simply miss the mark entirely on that aspect. There are some points at which our knee-jerk reaction to the main character in this true-life play would be suspected of mental illness, his is not totally a unique or singular type of craziness for the time, and especially less crazy than the strange twists that Abraham Lincoln's Secretary of War, Edwin M Stanton, took. While Stanton did not record that he believed he and Jesus, or God the Father, or the Holy Spirit had daily chit-chats (and "Matthias" did), at least "Matthias" allowed his beloved dead wife to be buried, and didn't keep her in his bedroom. On balance - or unbalance - "Matthias" DID expect Jesus to restore her to life any minute. Stanton, on the other hand, was creepy crazy. Rather than spoil it for you, take the time and the little bit of money it costs, and get this book. You'll be glad you did. (I'm aware of the tenets of Calvinism, for I've been one for 43 years; taught in Calvinist or Reformed churches; and am theologically trained on a post-secondary educational level in that field of study.)

"Kingdom of Matthias" serves as proof that religious cults and their leaders are not new to this century. A fascinating account and eerily accurate reflection of what happens when successful, intelligent people look for something more from life in the wrong place. With the sex scandals, questionable financial practices, media attention, and made-to-order eccentric leader, this story is a historical mirror to today's events. Recommended.

Although I am an academic with expertise in the Second Great Awakening and Early National Period of US history, I had never heard of the Prophet Matthias until a colleague suggested I read this book. "The Kingdom of Matthias" by Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz is an extraordinary study in what happens when enthusiastic religion and mental illness combine in one individual to tip him and his followers over into the unhealthiness of a personality cult. The Prophet Matthias stands in a long line of deeply eccentric American religious figures whose stories are compelling and frightening, yet who remain on the fringe of American religious history. He is David Koresh without an explosive encounter with BATF, a cult leader who demanded that his followers submit to him in

every segment of their existence, including sexually. But perhaps the most important and powerful story in this book is the story of his most devoted and loyal follower, who went on to play a significant role in US history in her own right. I decline to reveal her identity in this review because if the reader knows who she was, it will dramatically dilute the book's final paragraph and, ultimately, its full impact. Suffice it to say that you will never look at her the same way again after reading this book. I'm seriously considering assigning this book to my undergraduate students in "Christianity in America" this fall. It is very readable, very provocative, and will make you think about the issues it raises long after you have finished reading it.

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