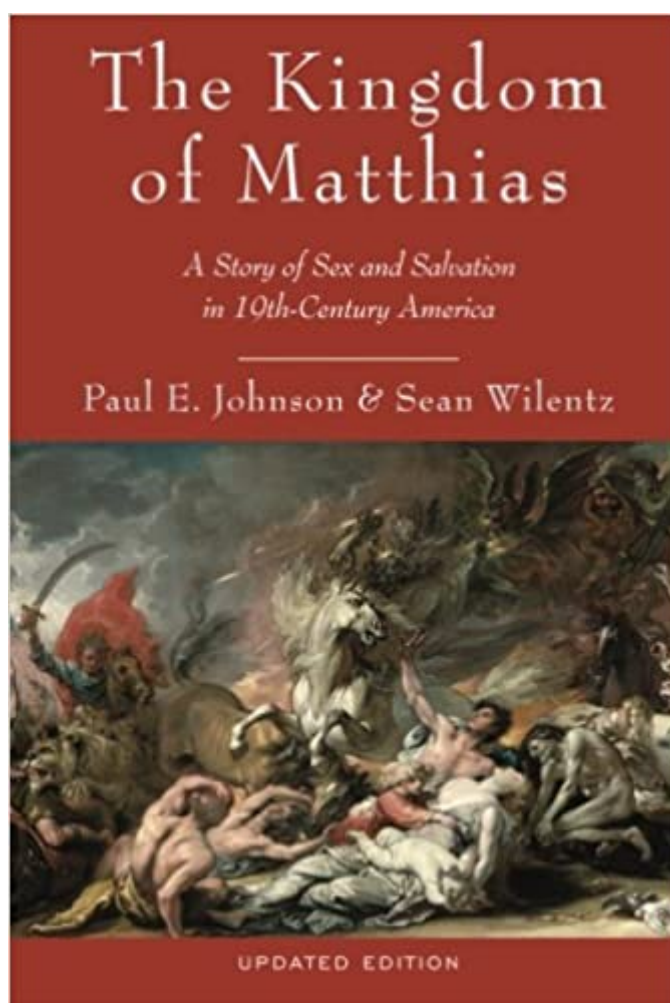


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The Kingdom Of Matthias: A Story Of Sex And Salvation In 19th-Century America



Synopsis

Paul Johnson and Sean Wilentz brilliantly recapture the forgotten story of Matthias the Prophet, imbuing their richly researched account with the dramatic force of a novel. In the hands of Johnson and Wilentz, the strange tale of Matthias opens a fascinating window into the turbulent movements of the religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening--movements that 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 personality 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.

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Customer Reviews

"The book reads much like a novel....The authors relate this offbeat tale like the good storytellers they are, squeezing the story out of a number of sources in a creative and imaginative way."--Journal

of Social History "A history book that reads like a novel of suspense and intrigue...it affords us a rare glimpse into a much-misunderstood time."--WORLD "Johnson and Wilentz successfully anchor their narrative in the religious and economic history of the early nineteenth century."--American Historical Review "The story is an inherently engrossing one, and its retelling will be of direct value to scholars of the history of communitarianism and of alternative religions. The scholarship here...is impressive; the authors have come up with remarkable detailed sources for a story so seemingly marginal and so long past. But even more impressive is their ability to tell an engrossing story in language at once scholarly and as compelling as that of a good novel."--Utopian Studies "This interesting and informative examination of an early religious cult will be a definite asset for anyone doing research on the history of cults."--KLIATT, November 1995

Paul E. Johnson is Distinguished Professor of History Emeritus at the University of South Carolina and is the author of numerous books, including *Sam Patch, the Famous Jumper* and *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837*. Sean Wilentz is George Henry Davis 1886 Professor of American History, Princeton University. He is the author of *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1950* and *The Rise of Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, among other titles.

The story is more than interesting, but at times I felt the authors got bogged down in meaningless detail (do readers really have to know every street address of every character?), and the way narratives describing individuals in the book were embedded in stories-within-stories was, at times, confusing. I frequently lost track of characters. About half-way through I definitely thought it a three star book. Three things changed my mind: the remarkable (and remarkably written) final paragraph, which sent me a shock of recognition of the implications of the tale, the final pages, which placed the tale in context, and the afterward to the second edition, which describes the art of doing and writing history so well.

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.

An interesting account of Matthias the Prophet, that was required reading for a class on the Early American Republic. The book draws you in, and makes history, which may be normally dry, into a fascinating woven tale of religion in Early America.

The Kingdom of Matthias was a very well written account on the lives of Robert Matthews and Elijah Pierson. The story is a terrible and dark one that takes you on a journey through the cultish mind, and shows you how easily the line between religious devotion and delirious imaginings can disappear.

it was a required book and came just like it was described

Thanks.

This book had me hooked from the start. Although at times it reads like a soap opera it tells the true story of Robert Matthews also known as the prophet Matthias. Although a highly researched history book it captures the excitement of a major Hollywood film. Johnson and Wilentz manage to weave the story in a manner that flows perfectly and tells detail by detail how Robert Matthews became the prophet Matthias and the subsequent fall of his kingdom. This book paints a vivid picture of the conditions that Americans lived through in the second great awakening. For many Americans who felt left out by the rapid transformation of the era men with ideas like Matthews seemed to merit some consideration. For a populace that was rapidly shifting from a localistic and agrarian way of life to an urban market driven one Matthews' ideas of hyper paternalism were attractive. I recommend

this book to anybody not just people interested in history. It brings together religion and history in a very exciting and enjoyable way.

What an interesting story this is in early American history. I recommend it and you'll get through the book very fast.

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