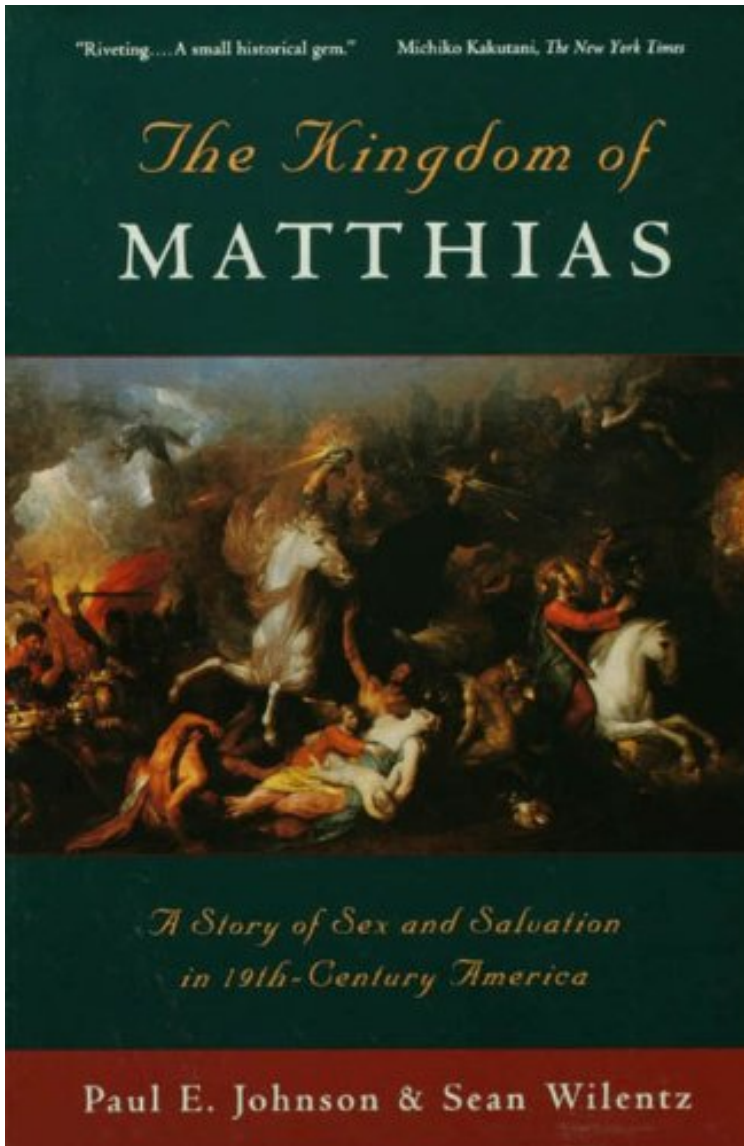


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The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th-Century America



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn 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.

From *Publishers Weekly* A curious 19th-century American episode is examined in this fluid, well-contextualized and dramatically detailed account. From the 1820s to the 1840s, explain historians Johnson (*A Shopkeeper's Millenium*) and Wilentz (*Chants Democratic*), the country was awash in religious revivalism, a reaction by those bypassed by the industrial revolution. In 1832 Elijah Pierson, a New York merchant and religious reformer turned self-proclaimed prophet, met Matthias, born Robert Matthews, an outcast in churches who declared his own visions. Matthias took over Pierson's pulpit, preaching an apocalypse that promised no economic oppression for the worthy who survived. Matthias, however, lived extravagantly, and stole a follower's wife. Pierson's mysterious death in 1834 led to Matthias's arrest for murder and generated much publicity in the fledgling scandal-hungry New York City penny press. Matthias, found guilty on a lesser charge, later disappeared. His story, the authors note, influenced Herman Melville, and shows parallels with other outsider religions and cults. An ex-slave who was Pierson's servant and Matthias's disciple went on to achieve lasting influence under the name Sojourner Truth. Illustrations not seen by PW. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

From *Library Journal* In the 1830s in New York, Robert Matthews proclaimed himself to be the prophet Matthias. He became the center of a communal, patriarchal cult, in which his fanatical fervor captivated many respectable people. Economic and sexual surrender were demanded in patterns familiar to us from Jonestown and Waco. Matthias was eventually tried for the murder of a follower. Historians Johnson (Univ. of Utah) and Wilentz (Princeton Univ.) present a highly readable and well-researched examination of this forgotten figure of the Second Great Awakening in American religious history. Matthias is presented effectively against the backdrop of his social and economic times and brought vividly to life. Recommended for public and academic libraries with reader interest.- C. Robert Nixon, MLS, Lafayette, Ind. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.