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

Paul E. Johnson, Sean Wilentz

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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.

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