

The Kingdom of Matthias Study Guide

The Kingdom of Matthias by Paul E. Johnson

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Plot Summary

The Kingdom of Matthias tells the story of Robert Matthews, who later took on the name Matthias the Prophet. A religious charlatan in 1830s New York, Matthews established a "Kingdom" of fanatical followers, causing a nationwide scandal.

Matthews' most fervent follower was Elijah Pierson, who was born into a strict Calvinist church upbringing but who quickly got swept up in the evangelical, "perfectionist" movement upon his move to New York as a merchant. Elijah married a missionary woman named Sarah, and together they established a "Retrenchment Society" and other organizations designed to spread the word of God.

In her fervor, Sarah literally worked herself to death, and died in 1830. The event spurred Elijah toward madness as he attempted to raise Sarah from the dead during funeral. Elijah started to hear God speak and he adopted the title Prophet Elijah of Tishbe.

Simultaneous to these events, Robert Matthews was born and raised in a Scottish community called Coila. His parents died when he was young, and after several of his sons tragically died, Matthews began to hear God and see prophetic visions. He adopted the name Matthias.

In May 1832, Matthews visited Pierson, and Pierson became convinced that Matthews was God's Prophet. Matthews used Pierson's merchant wealth to establish "The Kingdom." Matthews preached regularly to a small band of followers. Eventually, he came to regard Christianity as the Devil's work, and his philosophy was full of anti-woman hatred. Matthews convinced a wealthy couple, Benjamin and Ann Folger, of his prophethood, and soon he established a community at the Folger home in Sing Sing, which he called "Mount Zion." Matthews ruled his community with an iron fist, dressing extravagantly, bearing an unkempt beard, punishing severely, and lecturing frequently.

Not content with the Christian conception of marriage, several of Matthews' followers forsake marriage to be united in the "Spirit of Truth." This caused a good deal of scandalous "wife-swapping", as it might be called today. Matthews and Ann fell for each other, and Matthews proclaimed Ann as the "Mother" of the kingdom. Benjamin strayed to Matthews' twenty-year-old daughter Isabella, as well as to a widow named Catherine Galloway. The sexual intrigue proved too much for the community, and Benjamin and then Ann revolt. Additionally, an increasing public outcry against the Kingdom and its scandals assisted in its dissolution.

One day, Elijah Pierson, suffering from seizures, ate blackberries and soon after died. The public rumor was that Matthews, along with his servant Isabella Van Wagenen, had poisoned the man. Matthews was arrested and tried with murder after two doctors conducted an autopsy and claimed there was poison in Pierson's stomach. However, the prosecution had only a flimsy case, and the jury found Matthews not guilty of



murder, but guilty of assault (for beating his daughter), and so Matthews served four months in prison.

The Kingdom of Matthias scandal is noteworthy for sparking the "penny press" newspapers, with their obsession with crime and scandal, a tradition that continues to this day with such periodicals as National Enquirer.



Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

The prologue begins with the end of the Prophet Matthias's journey in early November 1835. The Prophet Matthias was found innocent of murder and theft by a jury in New York, but guilty of lesser charges, including contempt of court and assault. He lost all his followers, and was on his way to the Mormon settlement at Kirtland. Kirtland predates the more famous Mormon territory of Utah that Joseph Smith (founder of Mormonism) would establish later.

Matthias arrived and introduced himself to Joseph Smith as Joshua, because "Matthias" was infamous in New York. Joseph Smith told him of his visions and how he came to found Mormonism. After lunch, Matthias explained his own religious leanings. To Matthias, the United States was a second Babylon, full of sin and wickedness, and that according to prophecy, the country would be destroyed by God. Smith was not impressed by Matthias, concluding that "his mind was evidently filled with darkness." Smith knew from the first moment that "Joshua" was the infamous Matthias, and was only feigning ignorance. After another sermon, Smith banished Matthias from the Kirtland colony.

This strange meeting was one of many strange religious events that occurred in America from the 1820s to the 1840s, a period sometimes called the Second Great Awakening. Many religious sects formed at this time. The perceived enemy of many of these sects was the emerging Yankee middle class. This middle class' evangelical reformism was personified in the revival preacher, Charles Grandison Finney.

"Finneyites" were mostly northern entrepreneurs. They abandoned gloomy Calvinist determinism in favor of the idea of free agency and moral choices. Among other things, Finneyism led to a greater equality of men and women, and passionate reform/revival efforts. At its extreme, Finneyism's philosophy of individual autonomy led to a denunciation of Southern slavery and traditional marriage and family structure. As for the latter, it was reasoned that the family structure is oppressive to women.

Against this streak of Finneyism were men like Matthias and Joseph Smith. They were backward-looking. They advocated an unquestioned patriarchy (with themselves as the patriarch). They were generally poorer and less educated than Finneyites—anti-Finneyites were the ones who were passed over by society, in a sense. Anti-Finneyism ranged from indifference to Finneyism to outright hostility to violent mob assaults.

Unlike Joseph Smith, whose Mormon faith remains to this day, Matthias failed in his quest for a religious legacy. But in 1835, both men were perhaps equally notorious. Matthias was a sensation in New York, the center of a scandal that the rest of the book will cover in detail. Matthias also struck a chord with certain Americans fearful of change

and the changing roles of men and women. Matthias's story is shocking, but also relevant to the issues of the day.



Elijah Pierson, Introduction and Parts 1 through 4

Elijah Pierson, Introduction and Parts 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

Introduction: Elijah Pierson was among the first members of Matthias's cult. He was a very unlikely candidate for much membership. In the 1820s he was one of New York's best-known religious reformers. He was involved in the Free Church movement and was a passionate evangelical in the Finneyite mode. Elijah and his wife Sarah were the model of domestic bliss, and were united in their passion for reform. Her death sparked Elijah's "madness" that drove him toward Matthias.

Part 1: Elijah grew up in rural New Jersey, rooted in a stern Calvinist tradition. His great-great-great-grandfather was Reverend Abraham Pierson, who was instrumental in establishing the Puritan colony of New Jersey in 1666. Subsequent ancestors settled near Morristown, where Elijah was born in 1786. Morristown was beautiful and prosperous, and Elijah was surrounded by family. The center of town life was the First Presbyterian Church. The Piersons were founding members of the church.

Young Elijah was taught the Calvinist doctrine: God has placed men and women in certain orders according to His divine will, and people should be content with their station and act according to their station. Misbehavior would mean damnation and ruination of the town.

The Calvinist sense of social ranks was exhibited directly in the church: the most important people of the town (and those who donate the most to the church) sat in front, while the upper gallery was reserved for the poor who donate nothing.

Elijah inherited the family farm and became the patriarch of a family. Soon after, Elijah left Morristown for New York City to become an apprentice clerk.

Part 2: Elijah's flight to New York was not unusual at this time, as many rural young men headed to the city to find their fortune. Elijah was responsible and studious, and he worked earnestly for years. In 1820, at age thirty-four, Elijah and a partner named John Steinbrenner opened a mercantile firm on Pearl Street.

Pearl Street merchants were a new generation of merchants, less dependent on transatlantic trade than to the market revolution in northeastern agriculture. They bought imported goods at auction and then sold them in small lots to country storekeepers. Those on Pearl Street were a new kind of Yankee middle class.

With him, Elijah brought his strict morality, and he and men like him were in the minority in New York. The rich were used to carousing, drinking, and having mistresses.



Meanwhile, the poor community was equally as distant from a proper relationship to God (to Elijah's thinking), full of godless prostitutes and alcoholics. Elijah remained pious and moral, avoiding the temptation of women, and by thirty-five, he was still unmarried and chaste.

Part 3: In 1819, Elijah joined Reverend Gardiner Spring's Brick Presbyterian Church. The church was quite evangelical and reform-minded. Through a related group, the Female Missionary Society, Elijah volunteered to become a "male elder" for a mission church in a black slum neighborhood.

Elijah was slowly but surely becoming an evangelical. Evangelicals observed the squalor of the slums and saw failed families and bad moral choices. To better themselves, the poor needed Christianity to be brought to them. They needed a structure of Christian support. The Female Missionary Society was at the forefront of this kind of thinking. Women, rather than men, became the new centers of moral instruction and domestic authority. Problems were in fact blamed on oppressive patriarchies. At the extreme, family and marriage institutions were seen as causes of sin rather than protections against sin. These extremists branched out into "perfectionist" sects, and Elijah became a leader of this perfectionist movement.

Part 4: As part of his perfectionist work, Elijah met Sarah Stanford, a member of the missionary community and the eldest daughter of Reverend John Stanford, a respected chaplain. Elijah felt she was substantial and grounded, unlike other, more silly women. They married in May 1822.

Sarah introduced Elijah into the inner circles of New York evangelicalism. Elijah broke with Brick Presbyterian Church and joined Sarah's congregation, South Baptist Church. The couple moved to a larger house on William Street. Continuing to have success as a merchant, by night Elijah practiced his evangelicalism. Sarah and Elijah were united by "a shared vocation in Christian missions." Sarah exerted strong influence on Elijah's life, down to what he should or should not eat.

In 1825, Sarah attended prayer meetings led by Frances Folger. She was an ultra-evangelical committed to the idea of "retrenchment," an avoidance of luxury in clothing, diet, and home furnishings. Folger was reported to have scolded a fellow church member for the "luxury" of wearing a feather in her hat.

Folger's husband's cousin was a young merchant named Benjamin Folger. Frances Folger forced her way into Benjamin's home, and soon had his wife believing and practicing retrenchment. It was at the home of Benjamin Folger that Frances' ultra-evangelical prayer meetings took place. To "non-believers," this prayer group became known as the Holy Club.

Some members of the Holy Club claimed to speak directly to God and to have visions and prophetic dreams. After three years of this fevered prayer, Elijah in 1828 claimed to speak to the Holy Ghost.



Elijah's behavior changed, with many outsiders considering him insane. He railed against the concept of tithe at church, and he talked to the city's ministers about an ambitious plan to convert the entire city of New York to his way of thinking.

In 1829, Elijah and Sarah moved to Bowery Hill to join a burgeoning perfectionist community. Under Elijah, this community became the Retrenchment Society. They all dressed very plainly, and sold all their expensive furniture. They also restricted their diets. Sometimes Elijah went for days without eating.

Elijah quit South Baptist Church in 1830 to organize his own Bowery Hill church. The community became cultish in their Christian fervor, meeting as many as fourteen times in a single day and fasting regularly. Elijah preached sermons full of the prophecies revealed to him.



Elijah Pierson, Parts 5 through 7

Elijah Pierson, Parts 5 through 7 Summary and Analysis

Part 5: Elijah's power continued to grow. The Retrenchment Society built a school for poor children, and organized a mission to the Jews. A sister church was formed, the First Free Presbyterian of New York, and Elijah and Sarah started a mission to help prostitutes from the notorious slum neighborhood the Five Points. The couple soon after formed the Female Asylum Society to take younger prostitutes off the streets. They appointed a reformed prostitute named Mrs. Bolton to be matron of the society. Another woman joined the fold, Isabella Van Wagenen, a black servant who claimed to have spoken with God since childhood.

Part 6: By the middle of June 1830, Sarah was gravely ill. The diagnosis was consumption: she had literally worked and fasted herself near to death. Around this time, Elijah heard the voice of God very clearly, naming him the "Prophet Elijah of Tishbe." His purpose was clear: to prepare the world for the Second Coming.

Sarah died on June 29, 1830. Elijah announced at the funeral that, through prayer, he shall make Sarah rise from the dead. After an hour of fervent prayer, Elijah abandoned his hope, and Sarah was buried. However, Elijah later reported that his servant, Katy, saw Sarah at his home, asking about the children and urging Elijah to continue the Lord's work. Elijah quit his job and devoted himself to full-time ministry, promised by God that, should Elijah do His will, Sarah will be returned to him. Over the next couple of months, God as well as Jesus appeared to Elijah, again urging him to spread the Gospel and promising him his wife back. Elijah kept a journal of his conversations.

Part 7: Pierson's associates abandoned him one by one. By the latter half of 1830, Pierson was clearly deranged. His partners in the prostitute mission turned sole control over to Pierson, and Pierson's father-in-law John Stanford refused to speak with him. Pierson was undeterred, so focused as he was on his mission as the Prophet Elijah. Elijah's missionary duties as well as his business on Pearl Street ended, and he was content to preach to a small band of remaining followers.



Robert Matthews, Introduction and Parts 1 through 4

Robert Matthews, Introduction and Parts 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

Introduction: Elijah Pierson's life changed forever when Robert Matthews (aka the Prophet Matthias) knocked on his door on May 5, 1832.

Part 1: Robert Matthews was born in 1788 to a Scottish immigrant family in Cambridge, New York. The Scots forged their own community, named Coila, within the village. The Scots brought their uncompromising brand of Scots Calvinism with them from Scotland.

Coila's own Scots attended the Anti-Burgher Secession Church, a remnant of strife in the mother country derived from the English king trying to subordinate Scots to English civil law. The Anti-Burghers were fundamental and very strict in their beliefs, stressing simple and plain worship rather than Catholic ostentation. They believed in Calvinist pre-destination. Perhaps the largest religious event in Coila was the Lord's Supper, held in late summer, and preceded by a period of intense fasting.

Matthews grew up in this atmosphere. The town's spiritual leader was Reverend Mr. Beveridge, a tireless evangelical. Early on, Beveridge took a special interest in Matthews. The Anti-Burgher church stressed patriarchy: men led their families in prayer and other activities and church elders were always men. On the other hand, the church de-emphasized wealth, and made no distinctions in regard to personal wealth (unlike Pierson's childhood church).

Frequent in the congregation were visions and claims of speaking with Christ. While the historical record is uncertain, it is probable that Matthews also received visions as a young man.

Part 2: In 1795 Matthews' parents died, and he was given over to a farmer, who agreed to take in the boy in exchange for his farm labor. However, Matthews was frequently ill and suffered from "chronic nervousness." In 1806, Matthews left the farm to live with a carpenter. After a year or two, Matthews then struck out on his own to Manhattan, where he opened up shop as a journeyman carpenter.

Matthews was difficult to work with, constantly scolding his co-workers for sinful habits or trying to proselytize them. His co-workers, who were used to a frequent alcoholic beverage, deem Matthews "Jumping Jesus," and he was fired from one carpenter's shop.

In 1811, there is evidence in the historical record that Matthews was convicted of beating a woman, Hester Matthews. The next year, Matthews retreated back to his



hometown of Coila and found work as a storekeeper. On frequent visits to Manhattan, Matthews courted a young woman named Margaret and they married in 1813. In 1814, the two had a son, also named Robert, the first of six children.

Part 3: Matthews' life took a turn for the worse around 1816. He tried to enlarge his store, which stretched his financial resources. The expansion was a disaster that bankrupted Matthews. Matthews returned to Manhattan to start his career over again as a carpenter. However, within two years, two of his sons died from an undisclosed illness, and Matthews himself fell severely ill for months, further devastating the family financially. Around this time, Matthews was reported (by his wife) to suffer severe angry fits.

Matthews found new inspiration in, of all places, the African Methodist Church, an all-black congregation. Very unlike his strict Calvinist upbringings, the church showed him an evangelical excitement, and the promise of an end to slavery and racial injustice. Matthews also became influenced by a Jew named Mordecai Manuel Noah, a player in local politics who dreamed of creating a Jewish homeland, named Ararat, on Grand Island in upstate New York. Inspired by Noah, Matthews decided that he was not a Christian, but a Jew. Wife Margaret, by all accounts, thought her husband was quite mad by this point. However, Noah's grand vision quietly died, leaving Matthews without a movement.

Part 4: Matthews and family next tried their luck in Albany. The city was undergoing a commercial revolution because of the new Erie Canal. Matthews straightened out for a time, joining a comparatively normal church (North Dutch Church), attending to his family, and pursuing missionary work for temperance. However, he changed for the worse when the family contracted smallpox and another of his sons died. Matthews began ranting and raving, and he repeatedly whipped his wife with raw hide. During this period, he happened to attend a service by Edward Norris Kirk, a Finneyite, and this refueled his evangelical fire.



Robert Matthews, Parts 5 through 7

Robert Matthews, Parts 5 through 7 Summary and Analysis

Part 5: Kirk had arrived in Albany in 1828, at the invitation of Reverend James Chester of the Second Presbyterian Church. He shocked his congregation when it was revealed that he was an adherent to Finneyism. Kirk's evangelical leanings were too much for the conservative congregation (many of whom were important civic leaders), and Kirk was dismissed from his post. Undeterred, Kirk took a few followers and established the Fourth Presbyterian Church, using the North Dutch Church as a meeting place.

Kirk railed against Calvinism's notions of predestination, charging each and every man with responsibility for their own salvation. He held very long Sunday services, and his followers actively promoted his church and tried to get others to see him preach. He got many new members, many of whom are women. Matthews was drawn to Kirk, but his rumored beating of his wife, his strange moods, and his unsteady work habits convinced Kirk that Matthews would be trouble. When Matthews formally requested permission to join Kirk's church, the application was rejected. Instead, Kirk went about "saving" Matthews' wife and children from Matthews, humiliating Matthews. Matthews tried to clean up his act, but when he appeared for a service at Kirk's church, Kirk threw him out. Around this time, Matthews claimed to be receiving prophetic visions, sowing the seeds for the establishment of his own church.

Part 6: It was 1830. Matthews continued to decline mentally. He stopped shaving because God told him to, and stopped working. He had a vision of great destruction, and became convinced that he must save himself and his family from God's wrath. Margaret resisted his crazy behavior, but later Matthews convinced his three sons to go with him. Churches and local police put out bulletins about the insane Matthews and his three sons on the run. He was soon found in nearby Argyle, and the children were unharmed. He was interred in an asylum for two weeks. Soon after, after several fights with wife Margaret, Matthews was taken away by police for domestic abuse. He was released shortly thereafter due to lack of evidence.

Matthews came to resent men like Edward Kirk and their Finneyite ways. Matthews felt Finneyites were trying to disrupt the natural order that had women subordinate to men. In June 1831, Matthews abandoned his family and headed to western New York State. During this travel, he took up the name Matthias, after two men: the biblical Matthias, who replaced Judas as a disciple after Judas' betrayal; and Jan Mathys, a key figure in the German Reformation movement.

Part 7: Matthews went to Rochester, the site of a great Finneyite revival movement. There, he met his brother J.L.D. Mathies, a portrait painter. It would be the last contact he would have with a family member. Like Matthews, J.L.D. hated the Finneyites, but reportedly the two quarreled, and Matthews left Rochester after only two weeks.



Matthews left to travel among rural areas. He latched on to an Anti-Mason sentiment, brought about by the disappearance of a disgruntled ex-Mason (as in Freemasons). By denouncing masonry, Matthews got some attention. Matthews traveled as far as Washington, DC before he returned to New York City.

New Yorkers were astonished by his disheveled appearance and full beard. He claimed he was eighteen hundred years old, and he lectured to street crowds. No one knows how exactly Matthews came to know about Elijah Pierson, but on May 5, 1832, Matthews knocked at Elijah's door.



The Kingdom, Parts 1 through 3

The Kingdom, Parts 1 through 3 Summary and Analysis

Part 1: Black servant Isabella Van Wagenen received Matthews and brought him to meet Pierson. In the book, Pierson is portrayed as weak-willed and gullible, while Matthews is portrayed as strong and opportunistic. Matthews realized Pierson was well-moneyed, and able to be influenced. Matthews stated that Pierson "prophethood" was the result of Matthews' own actions. Matthews had "commissioned" the Prophet Elijah, and had now come to guide Elijah to God's truth. Elijah believed Matthews. Elijah turned his pulpit over to Matthews and never preached again.

Matthews took up residence in the home of one Sylvester Mills, an associate of Elijah's. Matthews conducted "fire-and-brimstone"-type sermons from that point on, to about fifty people. The evangelical sermons are quite anti-woman in their tone and content. Matthews damned the enemies of the Jews, which included "Christian devils." Matthews claimed he was the Spirit of Truth, who had lived for thousands of years. In his various incarnations, he had been Adam, Abraham, and Jesus Christ.

Matthews' version of the universe held men, and especially fathers, in the highest regard. Men were the source of truth. Women were not sources of truth and were not fit to teach religion in any way. Women distorted and corrupted the truth. Matthews predicted that in 1851, the world would end and begin again. In God's kingdom, there would be perfect families, no money or property, and a great temple from which Matthews would rule the world.

Matthews contended that they must prepare for this new life of luxury. The retrenchment-inspired poverty Elijah took on was discarded. Matthews ordered custom silverware instead of plain plates and bowls. Matthews also acquired the finest and most ostentatious wardrobe in the city. Elijah followed Matthews' every command, obsequious and cowed. Apparently, both God and Sarah (in a final return to him) promised Elijah that he had done the right thing by serving Matthews.

Part 2: Matthews' woman-hating and bizarre behavior concerned the community. The brother of Sylvester Mills, Levi Andrew Mills, obtained a warrant for Matthews' arrest. Matthews' beard was forcibly cut off, and he (along with Sylvester Mills) was put in an insane ward at Bellevue mental hospital.

Matthews was soon released, but Mills remained confined. Matthews' congregation crumbled. Pierson remained loyal and rented Matthews a home, where Matthews continued to preach with Isabella as his servant, but by April 1833, even Pierson got fed up with Matthews and cut off his allowance. Matthews was soon homeless and in shabby clothes.



Part 3: Matthews, undeterred, separately put Benjamin Folger and his wife Ann under his power and believing in his prophecies. Folger was the one whose house was taken up by Pierson in his own prophet days. By the late 1820s, Folger had moved to an estate near Sing Sing called Heartt Place. Matthews took residence in Heartt Place shortly after he was kicked out of his rental house in April 1833. Matthews renamed the residence Mount Zion.

Matthews turned Mount Zion into a small, well-knit community of his followers. Everyone had a job, assigned by Matthews. Matthews continued the ostentatious and very luxurious dress he had taken up in New York: many accounts remark upon his remarkable wardrobe. Matthews had elaborate, confusing reasons (usually Biblical references) for every type of color he wore.

Supper was always a feast, but Matthews imposed his own rules. There was no fowl or pork and food had to be boiled rather than roasted. Supper etiquette reinforced Matthews' vision of patriarchy. He sat at the head of the table and women served him. He drank from a silver chalice, while others drank from plain tumblers.

Matthews eventually banned prayer (based upon his hatred of traditional Christianity). Instead, suppers would be dominated by Matthews' long, angry sermons on any variety of subjects. He had an iron will, and no one dared contradict him. Curiously, Matthews fell into a rage when anyone fell ill, believing that sickness was weakness and a sign of disobedience.



The Kingdom, Parts 4 through 6

The Kingdom, Parts 4 through 6 Summary and Analysis

Part 4: The first section of Part 4 discusses Isabella Van Wagenen. She was born in 1797 (approximately) to slaves. She was sold to various owners and then to John Dumont, who kept her for eighteen years. She bore four children to a slave named Thomas. When Dumont failed to free Isabella ahead of New York's emancipation of slaves in 1827, she ran off and was bought (then released) by a farmer named Isaac Van Wagenen, from whom she took her surname.

Around that time Isabella had a profound vision of God in her life, and she devoted herself to religion from that point. She joined the Methodist Church. In 1828, she began work for perfectionist James Latourette, switching then to the African Methodist Church. Isabella next joined Pierson's household on Bowery Hill in 1831. Following Pierson's lead, she met Matthews and became convinced of his prophethood.

At Mount Zion, Ann Folger, wife of Benjamin, had become very cozy with Matthews. They took long walks and carriage rides and amused themselves with a piano for hours. Ann sewed Matthews special clothing and seemed the most eager to embrace all of Matthews' teachings. In fact, a romance had blossomed, and Matthews confided to Ann that he had a vision of Ann as the Mother of the Kingdom. Isabella witnessed this courtship and concluded that Ann was a devil shaped like a woman, sent to test Matthews and the household.

Part 5: Meanwhile, Benjamin (wife to Ann) was oblivious to this courtship, and spent most of his time back in New York, trying to save his and Pierson's failing business and reputations. Benjamin and Elijah Pierson performed whatever transactions Matthews ordered them to, including real estate purchases and the buying of invention patents, and the poor decisions drove Benjamin to financial ruin. Heart Estate (aka Mount Zion) would eventually be signed over to Pierson, who rented to Matthews at the rate of one dollar a year.

Benjamin was next told about Ann as "Mother," and that he must give over his wife for Matthews to marry. Benjamin reacted with anger but finally consented, and in a ceremony, Benjamin gave Ann over to Matthews. Benjamin appeared to have second thoughts, but the deed was done.

Part 6: At Matthews' instruction, Benjamin Folger traveled to Albany and called upon Margaret Matthews (former wife of Robert Matthews). Folger told her, briefly, of Matthews' community, and asked that their children, twenty-year-old Isabella Laisdell (who had recently married) and young son Johnny, be allowed to visit. Margaret consented to the visit, surprised that Robert was even alive at that point.



On the journey back to Albany, Benjamin had sex with Isabella. The degree of consent was not known; however, after one day at Mount Zion, Isabella consented to divorce from her husband and marriage to Benjamin. The ceremony was conducted by Matthews, who only hours before beat Isabella for her "disobedience" in having sex with Benjamin.



The Downfall, Parts 1 through 4

The Downfall, Parts 1 through 4 Summary and Analysis

Part 1: Isabella Van Wagenen and another member of the "Kingdom," the widow Catherine Galloway, talked about the unusual wedding. Catherine confessed that, in a vision confirmed by Matthias, Benjamin and Catherine were "match spirits" and destined to be wed. In that respect, Catherine obviously felt very sad and confused seeing the union of Benjamin to Isabella Laisdell. Catherine further confessed that she and Benjamin had had sex several times.

Isabella by this time had come to resent Ann, who had abandoned all household duties in her new title as "Mother," leaving them to Isabella.

Isabella Laisdell's cuckolded husband, Charles, heard of his wife's new wedding and went to Sing Sing to investigate. He was paid a sum of money by Elijah Pierson to abandon his former wife. Charles left, but not before telling the strange tale to anyone in Sing Sing who would listen. Charles then obtained a writ of habeus corpus from an Albany judge, commanding Matthias to release his wife into his custody. At a tribunal, though Isabella Laisdell stated she preferred to stay with the Kingdom, the judge ordered her to depart with her lawful husband Charles.

With Isabella gone, within days Matthews married Benjamin to Catherine.

Part 2: By March 1834, Ann became pregnant with Matthews' child. A family, the Thompsons, joined the Kingdom shortly thereafter. However, Mr. Thompson soon discerned the degree to which "wife-swapping" was going on within the Kingdom, and in fact Benjamin had his eyes on Mrs. Thompson and still sometimes slept with Ann. Mr. Thompson soon gathered his family and left.

Benjamin, influenced by businessmen on a trip to New York, became despondent and he convinced himself that Matthews was a fraud. He angrily confronted Matthews and demanded Ann back, who would not go with Benjamin. Benjamin went as far as to tussle with Matthews and threaten him with a fireplace poker. However, Ann calmed Benjamin into submission shortly afterward.

The increasingly curious villagers next played a trick on the Kingdom. A man named Elephant Taylor, dressed as a constable with a phony arrest warrant for Matthews, fooled Matthews enough to get him to shave his beard and flee to Manhattan on threat of jail time.

Part 3: During the time of the preceding events, Elijah Pierson had undergone a drastic physical decline. He had frequent seizures, which he called the "fitty devils," and he was depressed that he had never found a "match spirit" like the others in the Kingdom.



Matthews' escape to Manhattan prompted Elijah to declare himself the new Father of the Kingdom, but this offended the others and they followed Matthews to Manhattan. A dejected Elijah soon followed them and resubmitted to Matthews.

Back with the Kingdom in Manhattan, Elijah had a bad seizure. Matthews forbade anyone to seek proper medical attention for him. Elijah died on August 5, 1834, probably having choked on his own vomit and mucus. Matthews dismissed the event as Elijah lacking faith. The coroner concluded that Elijah had died of natural causes. No autopsy was performed.

With Pierson's death, Matthews was forced to give up control of Heartt Estate (Mount Zion) to Pierson's heirs, since the house was in Pierson's name.

The majority of the public concluded that something criminal had happened to Elijah Pierson, as strange as the "Kingdom" community was. To assure the public, the coroner ordered Pierson's body exhumed and examined. Two doctors concluded, after an examination of the stomach, that Pierson was poisoned and did not, in fact, die of natural causes.

Part 4: The Kingdom quickly dissolved after Elijah Pierson's death. Benjamin continued to be vocal about his doubts. Ann and Benjamin renewed affection for one another, frequently having sex, and Ann confessed to Matthews that Benjamin was the better lover. Matthews called her a harlot.

Benjamin next resolved to get Matthews out of his life for good. On the pretext of providing funds to establish a new Kingdom in the West, Benjamin gave Matthews \$630 in notes and gold coins, which Matthews took and left with. Benjamin then promptly alerted the authorities and claimed the money was stolen. An arrest warrant was issued for Matthews, who was detained in Albany after visiting wife Margaret. Matthews was formally charged with embezzlement and fraud, with a charge of Pierson's murder also forthcoming.



The Downfall, Parts 5 through 8

The Downfall, Parts 5 through 8 Summary and Analysis

Part 5: Interrogated by the police, Matthews denied any wrongdoing. Matthews story became ideal fodder for an emerging "penny press," a new kind of newspaper that focused on crime and human interest stories rather than financial or political news.

Matthews, with Margaret's help, hired a competent lawyer team, Western and Hill. Margaret announced her intention to divorce Matthews. Due to lack of evidence and a weak case, prosecutors abandon the charge of fraud against Matthews: how could the prove he was not an agent of the Lord? However, murder charges are next handed down, to both Matthews and servant Isabella Van Wagenen. Prosecutors claimed that Matthews, aided by Isabella, poisoned Elijah by tainting blackberries.

The trial was held up for months for various reasons. In the meantime, Ann gave birth to a baby girl.

Part 6: The penny press had a feeding frenzy, devouring every bit of news about Matthews and making him a nationwide sensation. Most are hostile to Matthews, labeling him an impostor. However, a debate raged over how much of Matthews' religion was immoral deception and how much was genuine insanity. To many, Matthews represented a larger danger of religious fanaticism. Also debated was the extent to which Matthews' followers were to blame for believing in such foolishness.

Benjamin and Ann, reputations clearly in danger, put out several newspaper ads defending their behavior and wrote a book to tell their side of the story.

The district attorney, William Nelson, added an assault charge against Matthews for beating Isabella Laisdell, shortly before the murder trial began.

Part 7: Though public sentiment was overwhelmingly against Matthews, his lawyer Western was a shrewd man, and he easily tore apart the prosecution's case. He asked the right questions to create doubt about the autopsy of Pierson's stomach, and even whether the body autopsied was Pierson's in the first place. Ann Folger and Catherine Galloway testify for the prosecution, though none of the Kingdom's lurid sexual details are revealed. By the time the prosecution rested its case, it was clear that Matthews would not be convicted. However, the assault charge was still pending.

Part 8: The judge deemed that there was not sufficient evidence for a murder conviction, and the jury delivered a not guilty verdict. The prosecutor then immediately proceeded to the assault charge against Isabella Laisdell. Lawyer Western was prepared for this, and produced a letter indicating that Isabella Laisdell had forgiven her father and did not wish to pursue criminal charges. Isabella appeared on the stand and swore to the same.

However, the judge decided that charges could still be pursued. The jury delivered a guilty verdict on the charge of assault, and Matthews was sentenced to three months of jail time plus an additional month for contempt of court, which stemmed from an early outburst.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Part 1: The authors talk of the fallout of the trial and the resultant texts that were critical to their research. Many penny press editors expressed outrage that a harsher sentence was not rendered. A man named William Leete Stone, in conjunction with Benjamin and Ann Folger, published a volume which catalogued Matthews' cruelties, but which went out of its way to portray the Folgers in the best light. Therefore, its accuracy is suspect. Margaret Matthews published her own account, in which the chief villain was Benjamin Folger. An independent editor named Gilbert Vale also wrote an account, which was heavily relied upon by the authors. He was aided by Isabella Van Wagenen, who was slandered in the Stone account and who wanted the truth to come to light.

The story of Matthews, aka the Prophet Matthias, was quickly forgotten in favor of "fresher" crime stories. But the sensationalist literary tradition Matthews' trial helped to begin can be later found in the work of such literary giants as Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville.

The authors next tie Matthews to a long history of religious cult leaders, a tradition that continues to the present day with such men as Jim Jones and David Koresh.

The life of the members of the Kingdom are next discussed. Sylvester Mills was released from the insane asylum and resumed a normal life, once again becoming a successful merchant. Isabella Laisdell and husband Charles returned to Albany and a normal married life. Though Margaret Matthews vowed to divorce Robert Matthews, no public record of the divorce exists.

Benjamin and Ann Folger were welcomed back by their old church congregation, and Benjamin resumed real estate business activities through the 1840s. No trace could be found of Ann's daughter. Heartt Place, aka Mount Zion, ended up in the hands of a reverend and later the vice-president of a bank.

As for Matthews, he quietly served his prison sentence, and afterward he arrived in Albany and visited Margaret, with Isabella Van Wagenen, his last loyal follower, in tow. Margaret refused to forgive or befriend him, and he left. She never saw him again. Three months after that, Matthews had his infamous meeting with Mormon Joseph Smith at Kirtland. After that, vague various reports put Matthews in Arkansas as well as Iowa territory, preaching to Indians. He reportedly died in 1841.

Isabella Van Wagenen did not follow Matthews out of New York. She successfully concluded a slander suit against Benjamin Folger (for alleging she poisoned Elijah Pierson). Although her faith was shaken, Isabella maintained that Matthews' teachings were the most rational she had heard. Isabella eventually traveled New England and joined with the abolitionist movement. At one point, she was told by God that her name

was no longer Isabella but Sojourner Truth, and it is by that name that she is known by as a noted anti-slavery advocate.



Characters

Robert Matthews

Robert Matthews was born in the Scottish community of Coila inside of Cambridge, New York, in 1788. He was brought up in a strict Calvinist "Anti-burgher" tradition that the Scots brought over from Scotland. The religion stressed egalitarianism, but also patriarchy. Matthews married Margaret and had several children. He ran a successful store for a time, but a series of bad business decisions brought him to the brink of bankruptcy. This trying time, along with the death of several of his sons, led Matthews to begin to receive prophetic visions. He became convinced he was God's prophetic agent on Earth and that he had to prepare the world for God's arrival. He adopted the name Matthias, claimed he was the embodiment of the Spirit of Truth which had existed for thousands of years, and began to preach all over New York.

He duped wealthy merchant Elijah Pierson into believing his prophethood, and with Pierson's money and connections, he created a "Kingdom of Matthias," leading a small band of followers. He was a harsh leader, punishing often and demanding complete obedience. Because God instructed him to, he never shaved his beard, which was alarming to the public. He dressed in the finest clothes and had intricate rules for supertime.

Matthews' Kingdom crumbled from a combination of inner turmoil and external public pressure. He died in 1841 after wandering the nation, as far as Arkansas and the Iowa territory, preaching his unusual beliefs to Indians.

Elijah Pierson

Elijah Pierson grew up in rural New Jersey in a strict Calvinist tradition. His ancestors had helped to establish New Jersey. Like many young men of his generation, he moved to New York to seek his fortune as a merchant. He found himself on Pearl Street, and with many years of hard work, he became a successful trader and was well-respected in the community.

Simultaneous to his merchant work, Pierson became involved in the "perfectionist" evangelical movement, and later with the retrenchment movement that stressed avoidance of luxury in dress and furnishings. Pierson met Sarah, the daughter of an influential church leader, and they married, united by a single purpose: to glorify God and spread His message. The husband and wife team established several missionary organizations. But Sarah died of consumption in 1832, and Pierson's grief drove him to madness. He started hearing voices and seeing prophetic visions.

In this state, he was an ideal patsy for Matthews to manipulate. Pierson came to believe that Matthews was for real, and so he abandoned his own church leadership position in order to serve Matthews. Pierson gave Matthews money, lodging, and countless hours



of service. Through Pierson's wealth and influence, Matthews was able to establish a "Kingdom" community of followers.

Pierson became increasingly deranged in the next couple of years, suffering from violent fits. He became ill, and Matthews did not permit anyone to provide proper medical attention. He died in bed, probably having choked on his own mucus and vomit. However, the public became convinced that Matthews had poisoned Pierson, and so there was a murder trial held. Matthews was found not guilty of any crime.

Benjamin Folger

Benjamin Folger was a successful merchant and an associate of Elijah Pierson's. Like Pierson before him, Folger became convinced that Matthews was the genuine article, and so Folger supplied Matthews with money, supplies, and, indirectly, his Sing Sing estate, which Matthews renamed Mount Zion. Folger took full advantage of the sexual promiscuity that was permitted inside of Matthews' Kingdom community, having sex with Matthews' daughter Isabella and another member Catherine Galloway, along with his wife Ann, who had unmarried him in favor of Matthews. When the Kingdom crumbled, Benjamin fought fiercely to save his reputation, slandering Matthews' servant Isabella and printing defenses of his actions in the newspapers.

Ann Folger

Ann Folger was wife to Benjamin Folger, and like her husband, she fell under the sway of Matthews, joining his Kingdom. At the Mount Zion estate, she became attracted to Matthews, and he to her. Matthews decreed that Ann's Christian marriage was void, and they married in a Kingdom ceremony. Matthews gave her the title of "Mother," and they planned to have a holy son. However, when the Kingdom fell apart, Ann's ultimate loyalties stayed with Benjamin. Ann gave birth to a baby girl, likely fathered by Matthews.

Isabella Van Wagenen

Isabella was a former black slave turned housekeeper who became Matthews' housekeeper and one of his most loyal disciples. Though believing wholeheartedly in Matthews, she came to view his attraction to Ann as a weakness and a test of his faith. Along with Matthews, she was accused of poisoning Pierson to death, but a verdict of not guilty was rendered by the jury. After the trial, Isabella left Matthews to join the abolitionist movement under the name Sojourner Truth. However, even after the Kingdom's end, she maintained that she still believed Matthews was the prophet.



Sarah Pierson

Sarah Pierson was Elijah's wife, who partnered with him in his missionary work. She worked herself to death and died of consumption, and her death drove Elijah to madness in the form of prophetic visions and voices in his head.

Frances Folger

Frances Folger was an enthusiastic evangelical who believed strongly in retrenchment, the simplification of dress, food, and furnishings. It is through Frances Folger that Elijah Pierson met Benjamin Folger.

Margaret Matthews

Margaret was Robert Matthews' long-suffering wife who bore him several children. Margaret was frequently beat by Robert, and he abandoned her on his mission to convert others to his Kingdom.

Isabella Laisdell

Isabella Laisdell was Robert Matthews' eldest daughter. She was twenty at the time that Matthews asked her to visit Mount Zion. Accompanied by Benjamin, Isabella had sex with Benjamin on the way to Mount Zion, and a day after agreed to abandon her husband to marry Benjamin.

Catherine Galloway

Catherine Galloway was one of Matthews' most loyal followers. A widow, she was attracted to Benjamin Folger, believing she and Benjamin were "match spirits" destined to be together. They are married by Matthews, but Benjamin soon abandons Catherine to return to his original wife Ann.



Objects/Places

The Kingdom of Matthias

The "Kingdom" refers to the religious cult community Robert Matthews, aka the Prophet Matthias, established in Manhattan and later at an estate in Sing Sing, New York. Matthews preached his unique brand of religion to a small band of followers, and was treated in many respects like a god or king. Internal divisions and increasing public outcry caused the dissolution of the Kingdom.

Manhattan

Manhattan, as today, was a financial and trade center in the 1830s, and many young men came to find their fortunes by establishing merchant trades within the city. Matthews first established his Kingdom in the city after attracting Elijah Pierson to his cause.

Pearl Street

Elijah Pierson, like many other merchants, established an office on Pearl Street. Pearl Street merchants were a new generation of merchants, less dependent on transatlantic trade than to the market revolution in northeastern agriculture.

Mount Zion

This was the name Matthews gave to Benjamin and Ann Folger's estate (called Heartt Place) after it was given to him for his Kingdom. It was located near Sing Sing, New York. Matthews established a tight-knit community of followers at the estate.

Bowery Hill

As a leader of the perfectionist evangelical movement, Elijah Pierson (along with wife Sarah) established a church on Bowery Hill, from where Elijah could preach and conduct sermons.

The Penny Press

The Kingdom of Matthias and its religious, criminal, and sexual intrigue was a sensation, perpetuated by the editors of an emerging penny press. These newspapers, in contrast to traditional newspapers of the day, reported on salacious subjects like crime and sex rather than dry financial or political news.



Poisoned Blackberries

Shortly before he died, Elijah Pierson ate blackberries served to him by Isabella Van Wagenen. He threw them up, and soon after he was dead. The public concluded that Matthews and Isabella had poisoned Pierson's blackberries. However, Matthews and Isabella were found not guilty of any crime.

The Unkempt Beard

Early in his prophethood, Matthews was instructed by God that his beard should never see a razor. His long, scraggly beard became one of his most recognizable features. Because the prevailing custom of the day was very neat and trim facial hair or no facial hair at all, Matthews' beard increased the public's distrust and anger toward him and his community.

Extravagant Wardrobe

Matthews believed that, as a prophet and the embodiment of the Spirit of Truth, he should wear clothes befitting such a station. He spent an exorbitant amount of money and time on a very extensive wardrobe full of the finest vests, robes, pantaloons, and every other garment. He had nightcaps and many other items custom-made with religious iconography, and he had an elaborate religious reason for every color and piece of clothing he wore.

Match Spirits

Matthews and his followers believed that certain people were match or kindred spirits, destined by God to be united in Matthews' own brand of matrimony. The notion of match spirits provided justification for Matthews to marry (and have sex with) Ann, ignoring her Christian marriage, and then Benjamin to marry and have sex with Isabella Laisdell and Catherine Galloway.



Themes

Hatred of Women

Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in Matthews' bizarre theology is a hostility towards women. The authors trace the foundation of this sentiment to Matthews' upbringing in a strict Scottish Calvinist community. This community functioned as a patriarchy: the church elders were all men, and fathers led their families in prayer and were the undisputed head of the household. This societal structure was threatened by an evangelical movement that was de-emphasizing the father and emphasizing the role of the mother as teacher and household leader. Matthews, and many men like him, felt threatened by this change and responded by retreating to more conservative conceptions of how the family and community should function.

Matthews frequently whipped his wife Margaret, and was later arrested and convicted for beating his daughter Isabella. He saw women as temptresses and devils who, with their sensuality and lust, could derail good men from pursuing God's mission. He believed the Bible (and later, his own visions) clearly indicated that women occupy a subordinate position to men. It was women who should cook for and serve the men at the dinner table, a belief Matthews instituted at his Mount Zion estate. To Matthews, women were certainly not equipped (intellectually or otherwise) to teach about God. God spoke only to men, and thus only men could teach the will of God.

Personal Tragedy

The authors have a discussion as to what precipitated the religious delusions of Matthews, Pierson, and the rest of the Kingdom's members. An important factor they point to is personal tragedy, especially in the case of Matthews and Pierson. Matthews' parents died when he was quite young; he was bounced around to a couple of different homes, and was said to suffer "chronic nervousness" as a result of despair from his parents' death. Later, several young sons die, the last from an agonizing bout of smallpox. It was around the time of this last death that something seemed to "snap" in Matthews, and he began to regularly have visions. It seems very likely that the trauma caused Matthews to spiral into madness that manifested itself as religious conviction.

In the case of Elijah Pierson, he gradually adopted the evangelical spirit, but it was only after the singular event of his wife's illness from consumption and eventual death that he "crossed the threshold" of madness, claiming in his grief that he could raise his wife from the dead. Around the time of his wife's illness, Pierson also became convinced that he was a prophet, destined to lead the world into the Second Coming of the Lord.

Madness in the form of religious delusion is portrayed as a kind of coping mechanism. Though both these men had extreme and unusual religious beliefs prior to misfortune,



specific events in both cases are represented as breaking points that drove each man to madness.

Sexual Politics of the Kingdom

Part of the reason why Matthias's Kingdom caused such a scandal in the public arena and in the media was because of its members' willingness to forsake their Christian marriages in favor of marriages in the name of the Spirit of Truth. The Spirit of Truth was what Matthias claimed was his true identity. He had lived for thousands of years, and had inhabited several bodies in that time.

In this spirit world, there were "match spirits," the equivalent of soul mates, who were destined to be together, no matter what formal Christian marriage rite had been performed. Matthews came to revile Christianity, so to deny the sanctity of a Christian marriage was not a difficult step to take.

It became increasingly clear that the concept of the "match spirits," especially in the case of Benjamin Folger, was merely an excuse to have promiscuous sex. Matthews and Ann became sexually attracted to one another, and Ann became married to Matthews and made "Mother" of the Kingdom. They shared a bed and had intercourse, but when circumstances dictated that Benjamin and Ann pretend to be husband and wife, they did so, and frequently had sex as well. Later on, Benjamin had sex with Isabella Laisdell, Matthews' married daughter, and they were discovered to be "match spirits," and so married. Meanwhile, the widow Catherine Galloway, no doubt feeling left out, claimed that Benjamin and herself were match spirits, and they eventually consummated yet another marriage of Truth. Elijah, meanwhile, was truly left out, vainly pursuing a Truth marriage to Frances Folger.

This degree of promiscuity created bitterness and divisions within the Kingdom and was a large reason why the community dissolved.



Style

Perspective

Authors Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz are both professors of history. Appropriately, then, they have carefully researched the events and people associated with the Kingdom of Matthias, as evidenced by a copious amount of footnotes in which they cite a variety of sources.

The authors freely acknowledge that there are inconsistencies in the historical record. Particularly, the text by William Leete Stone is biased towards Benjamin and Ann Folger, and hostile to Matthias. The Stone text also mentions nothing about the sexual promiscuity angle of the scandal. Johnson and Wilentz have a mission to be as comprehensive and objective as possible, and so, unlike Stone, they piece together the intriguing sexual politics of the Kingdom for scrutiny. When there are conflicting accounts, the authors confront them head-on, trying to discern what actually occurred.

Johnson and Wilentz are also interested in discovering what connection Matthews has to the larger history of America. They tie Matthews' religious philosophy to a larger anti-Finneyite and anti-middle class sentiment that was sweeping the nation. They also chart how the Kingdom's scandal caused an explosion in popularity of the "penny press" newspapers, a journalistic tradition that literary figures like Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville borrowed from. Lastly, they trace Matthews to an American tradition of religious cult figures, such as Jim Jones and David Koresh.

Tone

The authors strike a tone that is midway between an objective recitation of facts, and a more engaging storytelling mode. The storyteller instinct is evident in the authors' choice to start the narrative with Matthias's meeting with Joseph Smith in Kirtland. The authors wish to begin the narrative with a relatively exciting and better-known "spike" of activity to pique the readers' interest.

The authors also use tone to assure the reader that they have "done their homework" and that the narrative they have constructed is based on a solid understanding of the actual events, and that nothing has been fabricated. They acknowledge at several places when contemporary texts provide conflicting perspectives on a particular issue and they provide their own assessment of the discrepancy, inviting the reader to decide for himself or herself.

The text is fairly packed with exact dates, street names, names of very minor characters, and other details that indicate the authors' research was profound and comprehensive. Injected into this collection of historical facts are educated guesses about the emotional inner lives and motivations of the chief subjects. Beyond something like a personal diary, the authors have few ways to authoritatively conclude how



subjects may have felt or what compelled them to take this or that action. And yet, in the interest of dramatic interest, such emotions are guessed about and then included in the narrative.

Structure

The prologue to the Kingdom of Matthias starts with an event, the meeting of Robert Matthews and Joseph Smith at Kirtland, that is chronological well after the events of chief interest to the book. This is done because this famous (or infamous) meeting is perhaps the most well-known event associated with Robert Matthews, due to Smith's large success with founding Mormonism. The hope is that the readers' interest will be stimulated to read further. The Prologue also places Robert Matthews in a historical context, amid the evangelical revival of the 1820s and 1830s, and the rise of Finneyism.

Chapter one deals with Elijah Pierson, perhaps Matthews' most fervent follower. The chapter proceeds chronologically, beginning with Pierson's birth and then his evangelical evolution in New York. Chapter two, devoted to Robert Matthews, treats Matthews similarly, describing his upbringing and the various events that resulted in his proclamation that he was a prophet.

The authors make Pierson and Matthews' meeting the central event of the book, at the beginning of chapter three. Through Pierson's wealth and assistance, Matthews was able to establish his "Kingdom." Chapter three traces the rise of this kingdom and chapter four traces its fall, ending with Matthews' murder trial. The Epilogue reveals what happened to the central characters after the trial and discusses the minor legacy of Matthews.



Quotes

"In 1834 and 1835 Matthias was one of the first penny-press sensations in American history—the main protagonist in a deeply disturbing scandal that received unprecedented national attention."

Prologue, pp. 10-11

"In evangelical homes the primary moral teachers were no longer fathers who laid down the law; they were loving mothers who prayed with their children and taught them right from wrong."

Elijah Pierson, Part 3, p. 22

"The Bowery Hill community was not, as some of New York's more conservative Christians were beginning to mutter, a dumping ground for religious lunatics. On the contrary, it was a scouting expedition at the edges of a new experimental evangelicalism that had gripped a large segment of New York's up-and-coming merchant families."

Elijah Pierson, Part 5, p. 33

"Every day of the year, especially communion days, brought reminders that [Robert Matthews] might eventually gain a secure place as an independent household head within the community of saintly fathers. Yet that hope, like salvation itself, remained contingent on the Lord's unknowable will."

Robert Matthews, Part 1, pp. 56-57

"Despite all of his protestations of faith, [Matthews] was violating the most basic precepts of evangelical manhood, with his unsteady work habits, his self-glorification, and his domestic tyranny."

Robert Matthews, Part 5, p. 77

"Polished, well-educated, self-professed Christians like Edward Kirk were really devils, [Matthews] now realized, come to spread disorder in the world. They achieved their objective by wresting women from their godly subordination to men and by telling them that they had special powers."

Robert Matthews, Part 6, p. 82

"Isabella brought Elijah Pierson into the parlor. He was the kind of man Matthias would convert or destroy, a merchandiser who made money through what the Prophet deemed effeminate mock-work that impoverished better men."

The Kingdom, Part 1, p. 92

"Matthias vented his most awful rages on those who got sick, for sickness was a sure sign of disobedience. Matthias [...] insisted that sick people harbored detached spirits, or devils; blind men had blind devils, cripples had limping devils, and so on. Matthias could cast out these devils, and sometimes did so. But his usual response to sickness in



his house was rage."

The Kingdom, Part 3, pp. 112-113

"The Ann Folger that Isabella observed was no longer the chaste and humble housewife of her Christian days. She was now a sexually charged temptress who threatened Matthias with a peculiarly feminine chaos." (The Kingdom, Part 4, page 120)

"[T]he Prophet used Pierson's death as an example to the others. When Benjamin expressed surprise that Eljiah had died so suddenly, Matthias snapped that all his enemies would get the same treatment, hinting that somehow he, Matthias, had been responsible for everything. All who opposed him could expect the same thing: he had the power to do it."

The Downfall, Part 3, p. 140

"[T]he penny papers based their success on gaining a mass circulation among the urban working classes, crowding out the political news and mercantile reports that were the staple of New York journalism in favor of more fanciful, at times lurid accounts of life and death in the emerging metropolis. The Matthias story, with its themes of religious delusion, sexual depravity, and (in time) alleged murder, was perfect fare for the penny press editors."

The Downfall, Part 5, p. 146

"In the hands of writers like Poe, Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, as well as minor figures of the American Renaissance, metropolitan crime reporting furnished materials for more self-consciously artistic efforts."

Epilogue, Part 2, p. 171

Topics for Discussion

How did Elijah Pierson react to his wife Sarah's death?

Who was Sylvester Mills, and how did he figure in to the Kingdom of Matthias?

What did Benjamin Folger do to cause an arrest warrant to be issued for Robert Matthews?

What is Finneyism, and why did men like Matthews react so negatively toward it?

What was the outcome of Matthews' murder and assault trial? What punishment was given?

What chief texts did the authors of Kingdom of Matthias draw from for the majority of their historical research?

Name four rules that Robert Matthews instituted in his community at Mount Zion.