

Kingdom of Matthias



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PAUL E. JOHNSON AND SEAN WILENTZ

Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz are both historians with prolific academic careers. Johnson was born in Los Angeles in 1942, during World War Two. Nine years later, Wilentz was born in New York City in 1942, to a family that owned a bookshop in Greenwich Village. Both studied history in prestigious institutions and took up academic posts, with Johnson at the University of South Carolina and Wilentz at Princeton in New Jersey. They became friends through their work in the academic community. While conducting separate research on 19th-century religious revivals, each scholar independently came across the curious story of Robert Matthews and the press scandal over his cult, “The Kingdom of Matthias.” They decided to put their heads together and collaborate. The project took almost a decade, as Johnson and Wilentz painstakingly researched historical records and sources to bring the scandalous story of Robert Matthews’s 1830s-era cult to life. In doing so, Johnson and Wilentz weave together a telling picture of economics, gender, race, and religion during a time when American society was rapidly evolving. Johnson has since retired, while Wilentz continues his professorship at the University of South Carolina. Wilentz has also engaged with politics as a public figure, speaking out in 2006 against George W. Bush’s presidency and again in 2008, to endorse Hillary Clinton’s presidential candidacy.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Johnson and Wilentz offer a picture of the social landscape of the northeastern United States between 1800 and 1850, during a time of radical social upheaval. Around this time, the economic focus of United States shifted increasingly from farming to trade. A substantive urban middle class emerged, and their progressive values began to displace more traditional values of rural farming communities. A lot of religious reform took place during this period as well, gradually displacing strict Calvinist values (centered on obedience, fear, and paternal authority) with evangelical values (focusing on individual freedom, charity, modesty, and motherly love). Such religious reform ushered in an era when women (and especially mothers) had more visibility in the United States for the first time. The story also takes place during the decades in which American politicians begin eradicating slavery in the North. Shortly after the story ends, the Civil War erupted in 1861, in part due to the rift between progressive urban middle classes (predominantly in the north) and more traditional agricultural

communities that relied on slavery (predominantly in the south). President Abraham Lincoln released the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, which freed all enslaved people in the United States. The war ended in 1865, with the North winning. The story’s single Black character, Isabella Van Wagenen, went on to become an infamous public activist Sojourner Truth.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Johnson and Wilentz cite several literary works in their account. Several prominent 19th-century writers were inspired by sinister penny press tabloid scandals like the one that Matthias’s cult caused. Nathaniel Hawthorne references similar scandals in his 1851 novel [The House of the Seven Gables](#). Herman Melville (who personally met some of the people involved in the scandal) makes subtle references to Matthias’s cult in *Moby Dick or the Whale* (1850) and *The Confidence-Man, His Masquerade* (1857). Other historical nonfiction books about scandalous 19th-century religious cults include Hubert Wolf’s *The Nuns of Sant’ Ambrogio: the True Story of a Convent in Scandal* (2015). Like Johnson and Wilentz, Wolf offers an explosive story about a 19th-century religious cult (in a convent, this time). Judith M. Buddenbaum similarly offers an anthology of religious scandals in United States history in *Religious Scandals* (2009). Johnson and Wilentz also mention nonfiction writers who published books about the cult during the scandal itself. These include William Leete Stone’s *Matthias and His Impostures: Or, The Progress of Fanaticism. Illustrated in the Extraordinary Case of Robert Matthews, and Some of His Forerunners and Disciples* (1835). Stone’s book presents leading cult members Benjamin and Ann Folger’s version of events, which conceals their sexual relationships with several different cult numbers. It also wrongly shifts blame for the cult’s crimes onto their Black servant, Isabella Van Wagenen. Gilbert Vale’s *Fanaticism: Its Source and Influence, Illustrated by the simple case of Isabella, in the Case of Matthias* (1835) tells the cult’s story from Isabella Van Wagenen’s perspective, which ultimately clears her name. Isabella Van Wagenen is better known by a name she later adopts: Sojourner Truth. Truth’s infamous 1851 speech “Ain’t I A Woman?” offers one of the earliest historical formulations of intersectionalism: the idea that race, gender, and class combine—or intersect—to create complex forms of oppression in the United States. Intersectionalism features widely in contemporary culture and race studies today.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th-Century America
- **When Written:** 1985-1993

- **Where Written:** Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
- **When Published:** 1994
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** History, Nonfiction
- **Setting:** New York State in the early and mid-1800s
- **Climax:** Isabella Van Wagenen successfully sues Benjamin Folger for slander, and she uses her compensation to begin a new life as an antiracist activist. She changes her name to the one that history remembers her by: Sojourner Truth.
- **Antagonist:** Robert Matthews (“Matthias”), Benjamin Folger, Ann Folger
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Tabloid Scandal. The scandal over Matthias’s cult erupted around the time that early sensationalist newspapers—like the penny press—began running. Various cult members used the penny press to run smear campaigns while a murder trial ensued. As such, Matthias’s cult ended up causing one of the earliest public press scandals in United States history.



PLOT SUMMARY

It’s 1835, and Robert Matthews (who calls himself “Prophet Matthias”) has recently been released from prison. He travels to Kirkland to meet the Mormon leader Joseph Smith. Matthias wants to convert the Mormon people to his own religion, but they aren’t convinced. Matthias had more luck once before, and the book tells that story. It’s set in the early 1800s in New York.

The first chapter documents the early life of a man named Elijah Pierson. He grows up in a strict Calvinist community whose tenets include fearing God, denying personal freedoms, and obeying the male head of household. As a young adult, Elijah he moves to New York City in search of work and soon establishes himself a successful merchant selling supplies to rural general stores. Despite his success, Elijah finds it difficult to fit in to urban life, so he joins an evangelical church and begins doing charity work. He marries a devout evangelical named Sarah Stanford and embraces her lifestyle of striving to be perfect at living modestly, praying, fasting, and doing missionary work. Together, they set up an asylum that reforms sex workers and converts them to Christianity. Sarah exhausts herself with her efforts, and she eventually falls ill and dies. Elijah is torn apart with grief and starts having religious delusions. He believes that he’s a prophet named “Elijah the Tishbite” and can raise Sarah from the dead. Elijah’s friends worry about his sanity, and they ultimately distance themselves from him.

The second chapter discusses Robert Matthews’s early life. Matthews grows up in a patriarchal Calvinist community. He’s

orphaned at a young age, but the thought of becoming the head of his own household one day makes him feel hopeful.

Matthews moves to New York to find work as a carpenter, but he struggles to hold down a job: others don’t like working with him because he frequently shames his coworkers for acting “sinfully.” Matthews marries Margaret Wright and they begin having children. He has frequent violent outbursts and even beats Margaret with a whip. The family moves to Albany, and Matthias roams around preaching, while Margaret has to beg for food. She wants a divorce but her community advises against it. Meanwhile, Matthews grows out his beard and fingernails and starts calling himself “Prophet Matthias.”

The third chapter documents how Matthias and Elijah meet. Shortly after Sarah dies, Matthias (who’s wandering around New York City, trying to convert people to his new religion) knocks on Elijah Pierson’s door. Even though Elijah lives modestly, Matthias can tell that Elijah is rich. Matthias convinces Elijah to hand over control of his life and become a disciple in Matthias’s new religion. Matthias also convinces Elijah’s servant, a Black woman named Isabella Van Wagenen, to join. Then, Matthias recruits wealthy businessman Sylvester Mills and an affluent couple named Benjamin and Ann Folger. The group moves to Benjamin’s country estate in Hudson County and establishes Matthias’s cult, “The Kingdom of Matthias,” naming their home “Mount Zion.”

The remaining chapters document the rise and fall of Matthias’s cult. Benjamin travels often, making business deals to fund the cult, while Matthias establishes himself as the cult’s “Father,” whom his followers must obey unconditionally. As Matthias and Ann grow closer, Matthias decides that Ann is destined to bear a holy child, and they begin a sexual relationship. Even though she’s already married to Benjamin, Ann marries Matthias, establishing herself as the cult’s “Mother.” Benjamin is heartbroken, but he still does Matthias’s bidding. When Benjamin goes to Albany to fetch Matthias’s children (20-year-old Isabella Laisdell and 11-year-old Johnny) he seduces Isabella Laisdell. The next day, Matthias viciously beats Isabella Laisdell and decides that she should marry Benjamin (even though she’s already married to a man named Charles Laisdell). Another woman in the cult, Catherine Galloway, is heartbroken, because she also has a sexual relationship with Benjamin. The group continues obeying Matthias, swapping sexual partners, and recruiting more people. Charles Laisdell obtains legal documents to retrieve his wife, and he forcibly takes her away from the cult. Shortly after, Benjamin and Catherine Galloway get married.

Benjamin grows increasingly dejected, and he eventually tells some old friends about his unhappiness. Enraged, the local community storms the house and temporarily expels Matthias. While Matthias is gone, Elijah, who’s grown old and feeble, believes that he should lead the cult, and he has delusional episodes in which he pines for Ann to relieve his pain by having

sex with him. When Matthias returns, he feeds Elijah poisoned berries. Ann only eats one berry, but Elijah eats a whole bowl as usual. Soon enough, Elijah falls deathly ill. He dies two weeks later, drenched in his own vomit. The cult relocates to New York City, and a pregnant Ann rekindles her relationship with Benjamin. She rejects Matthias soon after, imploding the cult. Benjamin seizes the opportunity to accuse Matthias of fraud and murder. Then, Benjamin releases a public statement (and publishes a book with William Leete Stone), saying that he and Ann were innocent victims who were corrupted by Matthias and his servant, Isabella Van Wagenen. The public quickly accepts the Folgers' narrative, and they label Isabella Van Wagenen a sinful villainess. Isabella is appalled that the Folgers shift blame onto her to cover up their power in the cult, and she sues Benjamin Folger for slander.

Meanwhile, Matthias's court case causes a frenzy in the press. Ann delivers a damning testimony, almost convincing the jury that Matthias (aided by Isabella Van Wagenen) murdered Elijah Pierson. In the end, lack of evidence pushes the jury to rule that Matthias is not guilty of murder. Matthias is, however, charged with beating his daughter Isabella Laisdell, and he's sentenced to four months in prison.

Public interest in the scandal soon wanes, but the story of Matthias's cult inspires many 19th-century American writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville. In the aftermath of the trial, several prominent public figures publish books about the dangers of religious fanaticism in society. But even today, there are many such cults in the United States. Cults like this seem to capture a dangerous undercurrent in American society, fueled by disenfranchised men who are bitter about the loss of patriarchal authority, both in religion, and in their society.

As for what happens to the members of this particular cult, Matthias continues preaching and wandering after he's released from prison. Sylvester Mills ends up in an insane asylum, while Benjamin and Ann Folger resume their lives in the evangelical community. Meanwhile, Isabella Van Wagenen collaborates with antiracist newspaper editor Gilbert Vale to reveal the truth about the cult, including the cult's sexual promiscuity, and Benjamin and Ann's roles as leading cult members. Isabella Van Wagenen wins her lawsuit against Benjamin Folger, and she uses the compensation to begin a new life as antiracist activist Sojourner Truth.

strict Calvinist community. Calvinism emphasizes fearing God, deferring to the male head of each household, and valuing obedience above personal freedom. Matthews, a deeply religious child, is orphaned at a young age. When he reaches adulthood, Matthews moves to New York City to find work as a carpenter, but he constantly shames his coworkers for what he considers to be their "sinful" behavior and struggles to keep a job throughout his life. Matthews marries Margaret Wright, whom he often beats with a whip. He's resentful that many people in society (especially women) have stopped obeying men in the way that he was taught they should as a child. He also resents the wealth that many urban men have, compared to his own poverty. Matthews grows out his beard and starts calling himself "Prophet Matthias," abandoning Margaret to preach his new religion, or cult: one that will restore fatherly authority in the home. He recruits wealthy businessmen Elijah Pierson, Sylvester Mills, and Benjamin Folger to support his cause. Matthias takes up residence in Benjamin Folger's upstate New York house, and he runs his cult from there, with several followers. Matthias becomes the community's patriarch, and everyone must obey his commands. He frequently beats the women, including his daughter Isabella Laisdell, who briefly joins the cult. He also begins a sexual relationship with Benjamin's wife Ann Folger, and he allocates other women in the cult to his male followers. When Elijah starts having delusions that he should lead the cult and make love to Ann, Matthias poisons Elijah with berries and leaves him to die in a pool of his own vomit. Eventually, the public learn about the cult and Matthias is charged with murdering Elijah and beating Isabella Laisdell. The court case causes a huge press scandal, but in the end Matthias is only charged with assaulting his daughter Isabella. He serves four months in prison, and resumes preaching upon his release.

Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) – Elijah Pierson is the story's tragic victim. He's born into a Calvinist rural community in upstate New York, in which each family must obey the male head of household at all costs. As an adult, he moves to New York City in search of work, and he sets up a successful merchant business providing supplies to rural country stores. Despite his success, he struggles to fit in to urban life: he's dismayed by urban culture, which is much freer and seems more sinful to him. Elijah turns to prayer to help himself cope, and he converts to evangelicism, a growing religious trend that celebrates modesty, charity, motherly love, and prayer. He marries avid evangelicist Sarah Stanford. Following Sarah's lead, Elijah throws himself into religion, and he strives to be morally perfect at all times by living simply, praying, fasting, and running an asylum to reform sex workers. When Sarah falls ill and dies from fasting too much, Elijah is inconsolable. He begins having religious delusions, changes his name to "Elijah the Tishbite," and starts believing that he can raise Sarah from the dead. Soon after, Elijah meets Matthias (who also claims to be a prophet), and Elijah begins supporting Matthias's cause as his



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias) – Robert Matthews is the story's central antagonist. He's the leader of a scandalous religious cult that becomes a press sensation in New York in the 1800s. Robert Matthews grows up in Coila, New York, in a

chief disciple. Together, they relocate to upstate New York and set up a cult with Matthias in charge. When the local villagers—who are appalled by the cult—briefly drive Matthias out of town, Elijah (who’s mind is ailing) feebly tries to take over as the cult’s leader. He also makes sexual advances towards Matthias’s love interest Ann Folger. In retaliation, Matthias returns and poisons Elijah, leaving him to die a couple weeks later, drenched in his own vomit.

Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth) – Isabella Van Wagenen is the story’s unlikely heroine. She’s a Black woman who’s born as an enslaved person but liberates herself in the early 1830s. She moves to New York City and works as a servant in the Van Wagenen household. Through her church group, she meets wealthy businessman Elijah Pierson, and she begins working as his servant. She spends much of her life in search of religious truth. When Elijah joins forces with a strange traveler named Matthias, Isabella truly believes that Matthias is Jesus, mostly because of his long beard. She’s surprised that Matthias isn’t as kind or loving as she would expect Jesus to be, but something rings true to her about his agenda. She follows Elijah and Matthias upstate and joins their cult, as the household’s servant. Soon, however, Isabella notices strange behaviors: Matthias begins pursuing Ann Folger, a married woman in the cult, and this shakes Isabella’s faith. Eventually, the situation in the cult deteriorates and Isabella flees with the cult’s children when the police arrest Matthias. She leaves the children with Matthias’s estranged wife Margaret Matthews to make sure that they’re safe. When the court case proceeds against Matthias for murdering Elijah and beating his daughter Isabella Laisdell, two prominent white cult members (Benjamin Folger and Ann Folger) attempt to implicate Isabella Van Wagenen in the murder. The Folders believe that as a Black woman, Isabella Van Wagenen is an easy target, and they blame her for many of the cult’s questionable activities in order to protect themselves. The public are quick to brand Isabella Van Wagenen as a depraved villainess, but she remains resilient. Isabella recruits a writer named Gilbert Vale to publish the truth about the cult—especially Benjamin and Ann’s involvement as leaders, rather than victims of Matthias’s cause—and she successfully sues Benjamin Folger for slander. She uses her compensation from the slander lawsuit to begin a new life as the famous anti-racism activist Sojourner Truth.

Benjamin Folger – Benjamin Folger is a wealthy, well-respected businessman in New York City. He’s deeply involved in the evangelical religious movement, which aims to reform Christianity so that it focuses less on obeying the male head of household and more on personal salvation and motherly love. Benjamin holds frequent prayer meetings at his home. Through these meetings, he becomes acquainted with Elijah Pierson and Elijah’s strange friend Matthias, who claims to be a prophet ushering in a new religion. Benjamin joins their cause and hands over financial control of his estate to Matthias. The group all

move to Benjamin’s upstate home and begin their cult, “The Kingdom of Matthias,” which Benjamin funds with ongoing business deals. Things start to go sour for Benjamin when he notices that his wife Ann Folger is romantically interested in Matthias. Matthias takes Ann as his own wife, leaving Benjamin forlorn. Benjamin begins sexual relationships with several other women in the cult (notably Isabella Laisdell and Catherine Galloway) but he struggles to get over Ann. Eventually, he complains about his unhappy situation to some local villagers and causes a local uproar. In the aftermath, Ann and Benjamin rekindle their relationship, Matthias is arrested, and Benjamin attempts to sue Matthias for defrauding him. Knowing that he was an active member who personally funded the cult, Benjamin solicits editor William Leete Stone to publish articles that paint himself and Ann as helpless victims who were corrupted by the household servant, a Black woman named Isabella Van Wagenen. Isabella is appalled by Benjamin’s accusations, and she successfully sues Benjamin for slander. Despite this setback, Benjamin eventually succeeds in reintegrating himself into his former evangelical church community and resumes his life as a successful businessman.

Ann Folger – Ann Folger is married to Benjamin Folger. They are wealthy, established, active members of the New York evangelical community, which aims to reform Christianity to endorse more personal freedoms, especially for women. Despite her beliefs, Ann finds herself convinced to join a cult that celebrates strict fatherly authority (led by Matthias and supported by her acquaintance Elijah Pierson). Ann and Matthias get on very well, and she begins pursuing him romantically. Matthias decides that Ann is destined to be his wife and bear a holy child, so Ann marries Matthias (despite already being married to Benjamin) and takes up a leadership role as the cult’s “Mother.” She spends her days sleeping in, making love to Matthias, and shifting her domestic duties to the household servant, a Black woman named Isabella Van Wagenen. Ann still has sexual encounters with Benjamin out of pity. She also witnesses Matthias feed Elijah poisoned berries, and it seems like she might know what’s going on, as she only eats one or two berries that day, instead of a full bowl as usual. When the local villagers find out about the strange activities at Benjamin’s home (where the cult lives), they intervene. The cult flees to New York City and Ann starts to have feelings for Benjamin again. Eventually, she rejects Matthias, which implodes the cult. Matthias is charged with murder and assault. During the court case, Ann conceals her sexual relationship with Matthias but delivers a damning testimony that almost convinces the jury that Matthias killed Elijah. Nonetheless, Elijah is not charged with murder. Ann and Benjamin publish a book, claiming that they were innocent victims who were manipulated into joining the cult by the household servant, Isabella Van Wagenen. Even though Isabella successfully sues Benjamin for slander, Ann is able to convince the public that she was a good Christian woman all along, and she successfully

resumes her life as a prominent member of her evangelical community.

Margaret Wright (Margaret Matthews) – Margaret is Matthias’s long-suffering wife. She’s raised to believe she must be loyal to her husband, and she struggles to distance herself from Matthias throughout her life. Even though Matthias beats Margaret with a whip and fails to provide for her and their children, she struggles to find legal grounds for divorce. Margaret moves to Albany with her children and lives separately from Matthias after he starts having religious delusions and threatens the safety of their children, though she finds herself looking after Matthias when he intermittently shows up on her doorstep. Margaret keeps forgiving Matthias for his wrongs, but she always ends up disappointed.

Sarah Stanford (Sarah Pierson) – Sarah is Elijah Pierson’s wife. She is an avid Christian, and she believes in Finneyite ideas that encourage mothers (rather than fathers) to take a more central role in religious practice. Elijah is deeply in love with Sarah, and he devotedly follows her ideas about religion. Sarah also believes in striving to be as perfect as possible at living simply, praying constantly, and practicing charity. Sarah is so committed to her idea of living simply that she eats only bread and water and often fasts, driving herself into illness and, eventually, death. Elijah grows unhinged from grief when Sarah dies, and he starts believing that he’s a prophet who can raise her from the dead.

Isabella Laisdell (Matthias’s daughter) – Isabella Laisdell is Matthias’s 20-year-old daughter. She’s married to Charles Laisdell, but she joins Matthias’s cult for a short while and marries Benjamin Folger. Matthias beats Isabella, and he’s later charged with assaulting her when his cult collapses. Curiously, Isabella defends Matthias and his actions in court. When the cult collapses, Isabella resumes her married life with Charles Laisdell.

Charles Laisdell – Charles Laisdell is married to Isabella Laisdell when she joins her father Matthias’s cult. Charles seeks out Isabella Laisdell soon after, and he receives legal support to retrieve her from the cult. Later, when Matthias is put on trial for assaulting Isabella, Charles delivers a statement in court saying that Matthias (as Isabella’s father) had no right to beat Isabella: she was married, meaning only her husband could do that. Charles’s statement is instrumental in enabling Matthias’s conviction for beating Isabella.

Sylvester Mills – Sylvester Mills is a wealthy man who becomes an early follower of Matthias’s cult. Matthias first recruits Elijah Pierson as a benefactor, but shortly after, he recruits Sylvester Mills and moves into Mills’s home because it’s more luxurious than Elijah’s. Matthias exploits Mills’s wealth, and in exchange, Matthias offers Mills a leadership position in the cult. Mills is an active cult member until the cult collapses. Ultimately, Mills ends up in an insane asylum.

Catherine Galloway – Catherine Galloway is a cult member who lives with Matthias and the other cult members at “Mount Zion,” their home in New York State. Few people in the cult respect Catherine, and they often overlook her. Catherine falls in love with Benjamin Folger, and she secretly has sexual encounters with him when his relationship with his wife Ann falters, believing that they’ll one day be married. Catherine is dismayed when Benjamin pairs off with Matthias’s daughter Isabella Laisdell instead. After Isabella Laisdell leaves the cult, Benjamin marries Catherine, but he later leaves her to get back together with Ann. Catherine testifies against Matthias when he’s charged with several crimes after the cult collapses.

Elizabeth Thompson – Elizabeth Thompson is Mr. Thompson’s wife. Together they briefly join Matthias’s cult. When Elizabeth attempts to leave the cult, Matthias locks her in a room while he decides which of the cult’s men can have intercourse with her. Mr. Thompson rescues Elizabeth a few days later, before anything happens to her.

Charles Grandison Finney – Charles Grandison Finney is a preacher who spreads ideas in the early 1800s (known as “revivalist” or “Finneyite” ideas) that focus on reforming Christianity to make it less patriarchal. He aims to give more authority to mothers as the center of the home and as a family’s spiritual guide. He also argues that each individual is morally responsible for their own behavior. Finney’s ideas heavily shape Methodist and evangelical branches of Christianity. Finney’s ideas contrast with Calvinist beliefs that the head of each family (and community) should be a male father figure who must be obeyed because they’re responsible for the moral behavior of every person they look after. Finney’s ideas garner significant support in the Northeastern United States in the early 1800s, particularly in urban environments, and among women and people of color.

Reverend Mr. Beveridge – The Reverend Mr. Beveridge runs the church in Coila, Matthias’s childhood village in New York State. The Reverend Mr. Beveridge is a strict and punishing Calvinist. He believes that in order to be morally good, every family must obey the eldest man (or father figure, who’s the master of the household) at all costs.

Benjamin Pierson – Benjamin Pierson is Elijah Pierson’s father, and the head of Elijah Pierson’s family. He’s also a prominent member in the local community. He’s a strict patriarch who believes he must look after his whole community, and he makes sure that vulnerable people in the community receive financial support. He also believes that he’s morally responsible for his community’s behavior, and he even disciplines another man’s wife for behaving badly.

Mordecai Manuel Noah – Mordecai Manuel Noah is a politician who starts believing that he’s the Jewish Messiah. Authors Johnson and Wilentz speculate that Noah’s antics (which the press covers frequently) influence Matthias’s

attempt to refashion himself as a prophet. Noah later writes a book, warning that too much religious zeal makes people vulnerable to religious frauds.

William Leete Stone – William Leete Stone is a newspaper editor who briefly lives with Matthias in a boarding house in New York City. Stone is alarmed when Matthias tells everybody in the boarding house that he's a prophet. Some years later, Stone joins forces with Benjamin and Ann Folger to write a book about Matthias's cult. The book largely blames the cult's Black household servant Isabella Van Wagenen for its questionable activities, even though the Folgers were most responsible for funding and running the cult. Stone uses Matthias's story to warn against the dangers of religious extremism, emphasizing how it can corrupt innocent people like the Folgers.

Gilbert Vale – Gilbert Vale is a newspaper editor. He's a British immigrant who's involved with labor rights activism and anti-racist causes. Early in the story, Matthias approaches Vale, hoping that Vale will publish his ideas about religion. Vale refuses, believing that Matthias is a lunatic. Some years later, Vale collaborates with Isabella Van Wagenen to publish a book about Matthias's cult. Vale uncovers many hidden facts about the cult in his research, notably the sexually promiscuous behavior that went on. Vale also argues that Isabella Van Wagenen (the cult's Black servant) was not responsible for the cult leaders' actions, even though other leading cult members like Benjamin Folger publically blame Isabella Van Wagenen for many of the terrible things that happen in the cult.

Judge Ruggles – Judge Ruggles presides over Matthias's court case. After hearing evidence, Judge Ruggles advises the jury that there isn't enough evidence to convict Matthias of murdering Elijah Pierson, but there is enough evidence to convict him of assaulting Isabella Laisdell. In the end, Judge Ruggles sentences Matthias to four months in an asylum. There's a large public outcry because Matthias gets off so easy.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Johnny Laisdell – Johnny Laisdell is Matthias's son. He lives with his mother Margaret in Albany. When Johnny is 11 years old, he spends a short while living in Matthias's cult, but he's soon rescued.

Levi Andrew Mills – Levi Andrew Mills is Sylvester Mills's brother. Levi grows concerned when Matthias moves into Sylvester's home. Levi eventually has Matthias arrested for fraud, but Matthias is soon released and he resumes building his cult with Sylvester's support.

Mr. Thompson – Mr. Thompson briefly makes his family join Matthias's cult because he admires Matthias's emphasis on men being in charge. When Mr. Thompson realizes that Matthias and Benjamin are sleeping with multiple women in the cult, though, he takes his family and flees, believing there's too

much "wife-swapping" going on.

Joseph Smith – Joseph Smith is the leader of the Mormon religion.

Reverend Mr. Richard – The Reverend Mr. Richard is the head of the church in Elijah Pierson's childhood hometown of Morristown, New Jersey. The Reverend Mr. Richard holds Calvinist beliefs, which focus on fearing god, denying personal freedoms, and obeying father figures (both in the family and in the community).

Edward Norris Kirk – Edward Norris Kirk is a Finneyite who becomes a radical evangelical preacher. Matthews at one point attempts to join Kirk's congregation, but Kirk rejects Matthews because Matthews is violent and abusive.

Usual Crane – Usual Crane is a destitute man in Elijah Pierson's childhood community. Elijah's father Benjamin Pierson makes sure that Usual Crane finds work when Crane falls on hard times.

Frances Folger – Frances Folger is a prominent member of the New York city evangelical community. She's a combative woman who openly chastises other women for dressing too extravagantly. She runs prayer groups from her cousin Benjamin Folger's home.

Rueben Folger – Rueben Folger is Frances Folger's husband.

Mrs. Bolton – Mrs. Bolton is a former sex worker who runs Elijah Pierson's asylum for reforming sex workers who want to become better Christians. She distances herself from Elijah when he joins with Matthias to start a cult.

Arthur Tappan – Arthur Tappan is briefly involved in running Elijah Pierson's asylum for reforming sex workers. He distances himself from Elijah when Elijah starts having religious delusions.

John Mathies – John Mathies is Matthias's brother. He's a painter living in Rochester New York, and he's skeptical about religious fanatics. John and Matthias briefly reconnect as adults, but they have an argument and never speak again.

James Mathies – James Mathies is Matthias's brother. He's a poet who dies of alcoholism.

N. Nye Hall – N. Nye Hall is a lawyer whom Margaret Matthews hires to defend Matthias when he's charged with several crimes after his cult collapses. He's briefly involved in Matthias's defense case.

Henry B. Western – Henry B. Western is a lawyer whom Margaret Matthews hires to defend Matthias in court after Matthias is charged with murdering Elijah Pierson and assaulting Isabella Laisdell. Western is a prominent and respected lawyer, and he successfully overturns the murder charge, citing lack of evidence.

Edgar Allan Poe – Edgar Allan Poe was an American writer who lived from 1809 to 1849. Some of his writing was influenced by

the scandal over Matthias's cult.

Nathaniel Hawthorne – Nathaniel Hawthorne was an American writer who lived from 1804 to 1864. Some of his writing was influenced by the scandal over Matthias's cult.

Herman Melville – Herman Melville was an American writer who lived from 1819 to 1891. Some parts of his novel *Moby Dick* were influenced by the scandal over Matthias's cult.

Reverend William Creighton – The Reverend William Creighton buys Matthias's cult's former home ("Mount Zion") in upstate New York after the cult disbands. The Reverend turns the home into a hotspot for celebrity gatherings.

Isadora Duncan – Isadora Duncan is a famous dancer who performs at Reverend William Creighton's estate (which used to be the home of Matthias's cult).

Sandra Bernhardt – Sandra Bernhardt is a famous actress who performs at Reverend William Creighton's estate (which used to be the home of Matthias's cult).

Henry Ford – Henry Ford was a wealthy business magnate and the inventor of the first mass produced car. He attended celebrity gatherings at the Reverend William Creighton's estate (which was formerly the site of Matthias's cult).

Orville and Wilbur Wright – Orville and Wilbur Wright are aviation pioneers who invent, build, and successfully fly the world's first motor-operated airplane. Their flight demonstration takes place on the lawn of Reverend William Creighton's mansion (which was formerly the site of Matthias's cult).

TERMS

American Puritanism – American Puritanism was a movement among Christians from England who settled in North America in the 1600s. American Puritans believed that being pious (i.e., moral, good) was more important than following the Catholic rituals that were still part of the Church of England, so they attempted to purge Catholic influences from the way they practiced Christianity.

Calvinism – Calvinism is a branch of Christianity spearheaded by John Calvin. In the 1800s, Calvinism was widely embraced in rural communities in the United States. Calvinists believe in maintaining patriarchal authority, both in families and communities. The male head of each household is charged with ensuring the social, domestic, financial, and religious well-being of everybody in their family. In exchange, each family member must obey to the father figure. Obeying the wider community's male figureheads and fearing God are also central components of Calvinism.

Evangelicalism – Evangelicalism is a movement that gains popularity in urban religious communities in the United States in the 1800s. Amid a rising tide of concern about abusive father

figures and fear-oriented relationships with religion, evangelicals argue that Christianity should be reformed so that loving motherly guidance (rather than strict fatherly, or patriarchal, authority) becomes the anchor of each Christian home. Evangelicals also celebrate individual salvation through devoting one's life to being as perfect as possible at living modestly, praying, and fasting.

Finneyite – The term "Finneyite" refers to preacher Charles Grandison Finney's views about Christianity. In the 1800s, he argued that people should reform their approach to the Christian faith by focusing on personal freedom and social equality rather than fatherly authority and respect for the family.

Methodism – Methodism is an evangelical denomination within Christianity. Methodists encourage people to reject extravagant and luxurious lifestyles and instead embrace simple living, prayer, fasting, charity, and missionary work. In the 1800s, many Methodists perceive missionary work as the effort to save lost souls, and they tend to center their lives around this goal.

Mormonism – Mormonism, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS Church), is a sect deriving from Christianity. It includes new ideas from *The Book of Mormon*, published by a farmer named Joseph Smith in the 1820s. Smith claims that God revealed the book's content to him. The book endorses practices like polygamy, obedience, repenting, and the idea of personal communication with God. Mormons, or Latter-Day Saints, consider Joseph Smith their prophet.

Patriarchy – Patriarchy is a doctrine that celebrates fatherly authority and control. In a patriarchal society, the father figure in each household (typically the eldest male) has complete financial, social, moral, and domestic power and authority. Other members of society (notably women, children, and disenfranchised people) must obey their household's father figure. They also typically have fewer legal rights and no direct access to income or property.

Presbyterianism – Presbyterianism is a denomination of Christianity originating from Scottish immigrants who settled in North America in the 1700s. At the time, it was influenced by Calvinist beliefs, which hold that the whole community is responsible for its members' sins.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



PATRIARCHY, FAMILY, AND SOCIETY

The Kingdom of Matthias portrays a religious cult—centered on obeying men—in New York in the 1830s, led by infamous cult leader Robert

Matthews (or “Matthias”). Matthews grows up in a society where men are completely in charge of their communities, homes, and families. But he struggles to adapt when religious reformers shift more power to women. In the early 1800s, evangelicals try to replace the idea that families must obey the eldest man (or father figure) in each household. Instead, they want mothers to become families’ domestic anchors and moral guides. Matthews feels displaced by this new agenda, and he starts a cult that celebrates patriarchy: the idea that men ought to be in charge of all moral, social, economic, sexual, and domestic decisions in society. The authors of *The Kingdom of Matthias* Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz argue that the rise of Matthews’s cult is not an isolated incident, and describe many cults, historical and contemporary, that try to reestablish a conservative social structure in which men have all the authority. In writing about these cults, Johnson and Wilentz more broadly make the case that the cults reveal a dangerous and persistent undercurrent in American culture of male rage that men are no longer society’s exclusive authority figures.

The strict Calvinist community Matthews grows up in is structured such that men have complete power and authority—both in society and within family units—which makes Matthews believe that he, too, will enjoy this power as an adult. Calvinists believe that if one person in the community behaves immorally, the whole community is sinful, so they give the community’s men the power to keep everybody in line. This effectively sets up a patriarchal society in which father figures have complete authority. In Matthews’s community, the “ministers and elders” are “always men” whose job it is to lead prayers and publicly shame those who are deemed to have acted immorally—these men have authority to control others in the community. Within each household, father figures also have complete authority. Fathers are considered “the masters of their households”—they must lead “their wives, children, and servants,” and those women, children, and servants must in turn obey the household’s father figure. Matthews’s community encourages him to believe that patriarchal societies are good because they empower men to take care of everybody. So, Matthews acts obediently as a child, assuming that he’s destined to become an authoritative father figure who will help to maintain the community’s moral and social order.

By the time Matthews reaches adulthood, however, sweeping religious reforms have taken place in the United States that question absolute male authority, especially in the home, placing more emphasis on motherly love instead. Evangelical religious reformers worry about struggling families in which fathers abuse alcohol and beat their wives and children, so they empower middle-class women to enter poor people’s

households to provide spiritual guidance rooted in motherly love. This shifts the balance of power towards women within the home, and it also increases women’s involvement in society by encouraging public missionary work. Even though Matthews is the kind of person whom evangelicals worry about (as he has angry outbursts whenever he struggles financially, beating his wife Margaret and their children with a whip), he believes in “divine patriarchy”: the idea that only men are capable of teaching others how to be moral, holy, and good. Matthews thus thinks that allowing women to provide moral guidance—in both domestic and public settings—is wrong, causing him to resent the rise of evangelical values in American society. Matthews also argues that evangelicalism “systematically steals women and children from fathers,” suggesting that he’s angry about evangelical ideas dismantling his own fatherly authority in society.

By starting a cult, Matthews establishes himself as a father figure who’s in charge of his community, and which enshrines masculine authority more generally. Matthews structures his cult to make boys “work with their fathers, then join their sisters at night to learn the truth at the father’s feet.” Similarly, he claims that wives do their moral duty by “obeying husbands” who should be a family and community’s “only source of knowledge.” Matthews believes that this setup will create a healthy, moral environment that restores order in the home and in society. Instead of creating a healthy environment, however, Matthews ends up abusing his power: he beats his daughter Isabella Laisdell, seduces Ann Fogler, the married wife of one of his followers, forces his Black servant Isabella Van Wagenen to work herself to exhaustion so that he and Ann can sleep late into the day, and murders his disciple Elijah Pierson. The events that unfold in the cult show the pitfalls of giving anyone complete authority, and the nature of the physical and sexual abuse particularly suggests that unchecked male power leads to calamity.

The book broadens its particular focus on Matthews’s cult to show that in the United States there are *still* many cults in which angry men attempt to reclaim the power they once had in American society. Although not every such cult creates a public scandal like Matthews’s did, authors Johnson and Wilentz note that “extremist prophets” who exude “hurts and rages wrapped in longings for a supposedly bygone holy patriarchy” have “a long and remarkably continuous history in the United States.” Johnson and Wilentz thus leverage the story of Matthews’s **cult** to warn that American culture is saturated with dangerous—and ongoing—male rage about losing absolute patriarchal authority.



RELIGION, PERFECTIONISM, AND INSANITY

The Kingdom of Matthias argues that efforts to be religiously perfect can drive a person to insanity.

Historians Johnson and Wilentz focus the book on the life stories of Elijah Pierson and Robert Matthews, who are both devout Christians growing up in the United States in the early 1800s. Despite Pierson and Matthews's different understandings of Christianity and what it means to be a good Christian, both men feel immense pressure to be as morally perfect as possible, by praying, fasting, obeying, or being loving, every minute of the day. As a result of the intensity of these efforts, Johnson and Wilentz suggest, both men end up having religious delusions in which they think that God talks to them and that they're prophets. They then start a **cult** (led by Matthews) that destroys countless people's lives, including Elijah's as he ends up getting murdered by Matthews. Through the stories of these two men, the book exposes the dangers of religious perfectionism, stressing how trying to be perfect all the time can drive a person mad, resulting in behavior and choices that are both self-destructive and harmful to society.

The people in the book who strive to be perfect in their religious devotion suffer physically, showing that trying too hard to be perfect all the time can trigger damaging effects like illness and even death. Evangelicals like Elijah Pierson and his wife, Sarah, believe that "all time [is] holy" and that people are "being judged every day." This makes them think that they must devote every minute of their lives to being perfect Christians, by praying, fasting, and doing as much charity work as possible, even if it exhausts them. They behave in ways that prioritize "perfect holiness" above even staying healthy. Sarah is the most extreme example of this dynamic. She is so zealous about fasting and charity work that she falls ill and dies from "consumption brought on by exhaustion and malnutrition. Sarah had literally worked and fasted herself to the edge of death." Her commitment to her faith effectively kills her.

Moreover, the story's central characters, Robert Matthews and Elijah Pierson, take their faith so seriously that they begin to have delusions, which suggests that overzealous religious devotion can affect psychological as well as physical health. Matthews grew up in a strictly religious community, in which "long weeks of anxious fasting and prayer" trigger delusions in several members of the congregation. Matthews himself starts believing that he has "conversations with supernatural spirits" that evolve into full-blown "visions" as he gets older. A journalist named William Leete Stone also describes Matthews as a "madman" who has "made himself crazy" after hearing Matthews talk about his visions, reinforcing the idea that Matthews' religious fervor damages his mental health. Elijah, similarly, turns to excessive prayer after his wife dies, and his religious fervor ultimately triggers hallucinations: he comes to believe that he sees Sarah sitting up in her coffin. Elijah's acquaintances conclude that Elijah is "obviously deranged," believing that his religious fanaticism has unhinged his mind.

In the end, both Matthews and Pierson end up making destructive life choices that impact not just their own but other

people's lives as well. Matthews's religious delusions, for instance, inspire him to start an abusive cult in which he's violent towards women, forces people to work to exhaustion, and even kills people (notably Elijah, whom he poisons). Matthews's delusions actively motivate him to cause wider social harm. After Matthews's cult causes a public scandal, several public figures publish books suggesting that religious extremism causes "an overheating of the emotions that [causes] otherwise normal people to entertain strange and enthusiastic doctrines" that affect their ability to function in society. William Leete Stone argues that each of Matthew's followers "succumbed to the baleful spirit of fanaticism," causing them to act in ways that harm themselves and others. Stone argues that fanaticism is the "great error of the times in which we all live"—a phenomenon not just damaging to individuals but to American society as a whole.



RACE, PREJUDICE, AND RESILIENCE

The Kingdom of Matthias describes the lives of members of a religious **cult** in the early 1800s.

Most of the cult's participants end up ruining their lives, but one member, a formerly enslaved Black woman named Isabella Van Wagenen, emerges unscathed. The cult ultimately devolves into an environment filled with violence, sexual scandals, fear-based obedience, and murder. When the cult's activities are exposed and there's a public outcry, two white cult members (Ann and Benjamin Folger) try to blame Isabella for the cult's terrible activities. The public buys the Folgers story, quickly labeling Isabella as an evil Black woman. Isabella, however, is resilient in the face of this reputational onslaught. She works with editor Gabriel Vale to publish a book revealing the truth about what happened, successfully sues the Folgers for slander, and eventually starts a new life as the now-famous anti-slavery activist Sojourner Truth. Isabella's story shows how American society often undermines and vilifies Black women, but also captures how Black women often prove themselves to be resilient and powerful figures despite the prejudices and hardships they face.

Isabella Van Wagenen's life exposes the persistent injustices and prejudices that Black women experience in 19th-century American society. As a teenage slave, Isabella is separated from her parents and forced to bear children against her will. Her children, too, are all taken away from her. After Isabella manages to emancipate herself, she works long, laborious hours as a servant—even as a free woman she, and other people of color in American society, have little recourse but to live a life of labor and toil. Even her time in the cult is marked by exhausting physical labor: cult leader Matthews often scolds Isabella for other people's errors, and he continually demands that she work harder to compensate for others (like his lover Ann) who don't do their share of housework. Matthews exploits Isabella, as a Black woman, more than the other cult members,

who are all white. When the cult eventually causes a public scandal that spirals into a criminal court case, leading cult members Benjamin and Ann Folger attempt to blame Isabella, saying that she manipulated them into submission and even masterminded a murder. Their accusations highlight how Black women are often targeted as scapegoats, and the fact that the public blindly believes that Isabella was a cult mastermind even though she was far less powerful in the cult than the Folgers were illustrates the ways that racism can overwhelm logic or common sense in American society.

Despite Isabella's abject oppression, she emerges as the story's most resilient, empowered, and successful character. Isabella's story captures many of the ways that Black women are frequently undermined and villainized in American society, but also how those Black women are stronger, smarter, tougher, and more admirable than people give them credit for. Isabella successfully emancipates herself from a life of slavery and, when the Folgers accuse Isabella of masterminding the cult and murdering Elijah, she successfully sues them for slander, clears her name by publishing the truth about the Folgers' involvement in the cult, and uses her compensation from the trial to start a new life as the activist and public speaker Sojourner Truth. More broadly, through Isabella's story, the book shows the ways that American society tends to undermine and undervalue Black women like Isabella/ Sojourner, and yet how those same women regularly prove themselves to be profoundly resilient and powerful figures.



RURAL LIFE AND URBAN CULTURE

The Kingdom of Matthias describes the life stories of Elijah Pierson and Robert Matthews, two young men who grew up in poor, rural communities in the

Northeastern United States in the early 1800s, around the time when urban culture in cities like New York began to have a strong impact on American society. The men's rural upbringings focus on community, family, farming, and strict religious obedience, but they are both forced to seek work in New York, where life is very different. Pierson ends up becoming a successful merchant, while Matthews struggles to find work. Despite their different paths, both men feel out of place in an urban society that privileges individual freedom, trade, and economic success. As a result, both men turn even more powerfully to religion, which ends in them starting a **cult** that tries to recreate the faith-based community values they knew from their childhoods, with disastrous results. Through Pierson and Matthews's story, authors Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz offer a cautionary tale about people from rural, homogeneous, traditional faith-based communities who cling too tightly to traditional values and therefore struggle to adapt as their societies grow and change.

Elijah Pierson and Robert Matthews both grow up in close-knit, religious, rural communities, and when they go to find work in

New York City each of them struggles to adapt to the affluent, individualistic culture in the city. Elijah's father, Benjamin Pierson, is a church leader who looks after many of the people in his town, and Elijah notices and admires the way that his community centers on "mutual care and obligation" and ensures that "widows stayed warm in winter, deaf people took the best seats in church, and [impoverished men] kept their dignity." Elijah thus grows up in an environment where community leaders (typically wealthy, elderly men) take care of those who are more vulnerable. Matthews, similarly, grows up as an orphan who's cared for by church leaders in his community. They even set Matthews up with his own business when he becomes an adult, such that he becomes used to having support from others to make his way in the world.

As adults, though, both Elijah and Matthews struggle to adapt to New York's more secular, individualistic culture, because it conflicts with their religious and community-oriented childhood values. Moreover, their efforts to integrate into urban society's religious communities ultimately fail, leaving them even more isolated. Elijah becomes a well-respected merchant, but he's unable to fit in with other affluent men who prefer to drink, seek luxury, and pursue relationships with multiple women, all of which conflict with Elijah's small-town "moral code." Matthews, meanwhile, who works as a laborer, is rejected by New York's working-class community because he keeps scolding others for what he sees as their "immoral" behavior, such as drinking. Both men feel isolated and unable to integrate into New York's urban culture, because they find that other New Yorkers embrace drinking, socializing, and personal happiness over faith, work, and obedience to community leaders.

Both Elijah and Matthews respond to their sense of isolation by seeking a sense of community through religion, which feels familiar to them. However, they also find it difficult to adapt to evolving religious ideas. Elijah begins attending a Methodist church and engaging in missionary work with his wife, Sarah. However, when Sarah dies, Elijah struggles to keep evolving and fitting in to his community without her guidance. Most of his acquaintances ultimately reject him, believing that he's losing his mind. Elijah's struggles to adapt to changing situations in his life thus ends up pushing people away and isolating him even more. Matthews is also excited by the sense of community he witnesses at a Methodist church, and he strives to fit in within the evangelical church community, but he feels "humiliated" when they reject him after learning that he beats his wife. Instead of adjusting his behavior to fit the community's values, however, Matthews assumes that he's being mistreated because he's poor. Matthews's inability to change and embrace evolving social values thus ends up isolating him.

Matthews, with Elijah's support, ends up starting a **cult** that recreates traditional, faith-based, community-oriented rural

living, but it ultimately devolves into a hostile, violent environment resulting in Elijah's death and Matthews's imprisonment. Matthews sets up the cult as an extended "traditional farm family," attempting to "revive[] the rural ways he had known in his youth," but he takes his vision so seriously that he grows deluded, and he ends up terrorizing his followers. He eventually murders Elijah and winds up in prison for beating his daughter Isabella Laisdell. Matthews and Elijah's obsession with recreating a way of life that is fading from their society ends up destroying their lives. In contrast, other cult members—including Benjamin and Ann Folger and Isabella Van Wagenen—fare much better because they are able to adjust their values after escaping the cult, enabling them to reintegrate into society. This juxtaposition suggests that rigid adherence to a single lifestyle will ultimately lead to failure, while those who can adjust to a changing moral and social landscape leave themselves with more options to find success, because society itself is always changing and evolving.



DESIRE, RELATIONSHIPS, AND SEXUAL FREEDOM

The Kingdom of Matthias documents the rise and fall of a religious **cult** in the 1800s. However, despite claiming to be religiously motivated, the cult members are often more forcefully motivated by sexual desires. Cult leader Matthews, for example, invents new rules so that he can seduce his follower Benjamin Folger's wife, Ann. Ann's involvement in the cult, too, is largely driven by her romance with Matthews: her faith wanes along with her desire for Matthews. Matthews also often manipulates his followers by appealing to their sexual desires. He pairs off cult members who are attracted to each other (regardless of whom they're actually married to), claiming that he's enacting God's will. Some cult members happily comply, while others feel coerced. The primacy of sex and sexuality in motivating the actions of cult members, along with the sexual abuse that ultimately runs rampant through the cult, suggests two things: first, that sexual desire is an innate and powerful part of human experience regardless of religious notions of purity; and second, that because of the centrality of sex and sexuality in human experience, in oppressive or dictatorial contexts sex itself quickly becomes perversely tied up in efforts to assert or maintain power and control.

While Matthews's cult is originally meant to serve as a religiously pure community in a world of sin, the cult quickly and profoundly shifts to accommodate the sexual desires of its leader. Further, Matthews finds ways to continue to speak in the language of religion while in fact serving his sexual desire. After growing attracted to his follower Benjamin Folger's wife, Ann, Matthews claims to have visions about which cult members should be together—including him and Ann. For her part, Ann is an ardent believer in Matthews's religion when she's sexually and romantically attracted to him, but her

commitment to the cult ends when she stops desiring Matthews. Matthews also manipulates disgruntled cult members by pairing them off with people whom they're attracted to—he uses sexual desire (rather than solely faith) as a motivator in his cult. Shortly after beginning a relationship with Ann, Matthews pairs Ann's husband Benjamin (who's the primary financial provider for the cult, and who's deeply disheartened by losing Ann) with two different women (including his own daughter, Isabella Laisdell) to placate him. After Isabella Laisdell's husband, Charles Laisdell, retrieves her from the cult, Matthews pairs Benjamin with Catherine Galloway. Benjamin is less satisfied by this second match, and he grows dissatisfied with the cult. From beginning to end, the members of this cult founded for religious purposes are motivated easily as much by sex as by faith.

While some cult members embrace the sexual freedom that becomes characteristic of the cult, for other cult members the sexual fluidity is not a form of freedom at all. Quite the contrary, it's Matthews—not the cult members themselves—who largely decides who should have relationships with each other. Matthews and Ann begin a relationship without Benjamin's consent, even though Benjamin is already married to Ann. Ann continues her sexual relationship with Benjamin while she's with Matthews, but Benjamin feels disheartened, lost, and heartbroken, showing that his boundaries are not respected in this arrangement. Similarly, Matthews pairs Benjamin with Catherine Galloway, but Benjamin is dissatisfied with the match, suggesting once more that his consent is not factored into the arrangement. At another time, Matthews locks a cult member with whom he is annoyed, Mrs. Thompson, into a room against her will while deciding whom to revengefully pair her off with, though her husband rescues her before this can happen. It is clear, then, that Matthews uses the sexual "freedom" within the cult to establish and maintain his power, as well as to satisfy his whims. The sexual freedom of the cult is a fiction, reserved for its leader and used by that leader to manipulate and control his followers.

After the existence of the cult is revealed to public scandal, cult members attempt to hide and obscure the sexual openness with which they operated. For instance, while Ann Folger enjoyed the sexually open aspects of the cult, during Matthews's trial she delivers damning testimony against him, painting herself as an innocent, chaste victim. Ann's concealment of her sexual behavior shows her worries about being rejected by society for being too promiscuous. Benjamin conceals his relationships with Isabella Laisdell and Catherine Galloway for the same reason. These characters' actions suggest a complicated relationship with sex and sexuality. For one thing, their actions suggest that it's only the fear of social shame that interferes with people engaging in more sexually open ways. Further, it suggests that such shaming can drive

people to explore sexually atypical behavior in secret, but that the prospect of being shamed for that behavior can contribute to such sex being used for abusive or exploitative purposes. *The Kingdom of Matthias* shows how, in the repressive environment of a community like Matthews's cult, sex becomes a means to assert power and control. But it also shows how the seeming freedom offered by the cult allows people to experiment with a sexual openness not allowed by mainstream society, and therefore implies how the shaming so common in mainstream society makes the sexual opportunities in the cult both initially attractive and prone to abuse. In this way, the book suggests that a freer, more open society would enable people to explore their sexual and romantic urges in healthier ways, without falling prey to nonconsensual and manipulative environments like the cult.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



CULT

The Kingdom of Matthias documents the rise and fall of a historic cult in New York in the 1800s. The cult itself symbolizes the dysfunctional rage in men who feel ignored by a society that's rapidly becoming more progressive (and less patriarchal) than they want it to be.

The cult centers on a poor, white, uneducated man (Matthias) who grows up in a strictly religious Calvinist community, believing that one day, he'll be an authoritative father figure running his own household. When Matthias grows up, however, he's thrust into a world in which people increasingly value personal freedom over fatherly authority. Around this time, urban middle-class culture is on the rise, anchored by people who grow successful through trade. In comparison, Matthias—a poor man from a traditional farming community with strict patriarchal values—feels that society has left him behind. Out of rage, Matthias starts a cult that reenacts the power structure that life has denied him. He establishes himself as a father figure who has complete authority over his followers. Shortly after, he initiates wife-swapping, violence, and even murder.

The cult illustrates the toxic effects of poor, white, male rage on vulnerable and/or marginalized people (especially women, children, and people of color). Moreover, authors Johnson and Wilentz argue that cults like Matthias's continue to exist today, showing that there are still many people in American society—especially disenfranchised, white, uneducated men—who feel angry about being sidelined by a society that once promised them complete power and authority. In order to reclaim their lost authority, such men try to create mini-

societies that return power to a paternal figure (a head of household, community leader, or God, which they claim to personify). These cults represent dysfunctional rage-fueled attempts to cling to patriarchal values that are waning in American society.





QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Oxford University Press edition of *Kingdom of Matthias* published in 2012.

Prologue: Two Prophets at Kirtland Quotes

☛ In contrast to the Finneyite inventors of Yankee middle-class culture, the two prophets at Kirtland may look like marginal men—cranky nay-sayers to the economic, domestic, and social progress of the nineteenth century. Against the Finneyites' feminized spirituality of restraint, Smith and Matthias (each in his own way) resurrected an ethos of fixed social relations and paternal power. Yet as they saw things, they were defenders of ancient truth against the perverse claims of arrogant, affluent, and self-satisfied enemies of God.

Related Characters: Joseph Smith, Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Charles Grandison Finney

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

The book begins by describing a brief meeting between Robert Matthews (otherwise known as “Matthias,” founder of the cult around which the story revolves) and Joseph Smith (leader of the Mormon religion). The two men describe themselves as “prophets,” and they share a commitment to living a way of life that is becoming increasingly marginalized in the United States. The authors thus suggest from the outset that Matthews's and Smith's values contradict newly emerging social and religious values in 19th century American culture. The new values are exemplified by a Christian preacher named Charles Grandison Finney. Followers of Finney-style evangelicalism, who are mostly middle-class urban people in the Northeastern United States, referred to here as the “Yankee middle-class,” become known as “Finneyites.” The authors describe what bothers people like Matthews and Smith about the Finneyite lifestyle.


Matthews and Smith are used to living in societies with “paternal power” (societies in which a patriarch, or father


figure, has complete authority, both in the home and in society) and “fixed social relations” (meaning that everybody in the community adheres to traditional social hierarchy, centered on obedience to patriarchs).

Finneyites reject that picture, because they emphasize individual choice over traditional structures. This idea ends up having a dramatic impact on American culture, including economic life: Finneyites celebrate pursuing success and wealth through trade instead of living modestly on farming. The Finneyite way of life also has an impact on domestic life, as Finneyites encourage mothers, rather than fathers, to run the day-to-day aspects of family life within the home. Finally, the Finneyite agenda impacts social culture, because Finneyites celebrate individual freedom. They encourage each person to make their own religious and moral choices, rather than submitting to their community as a whole.

☛ But Americans also sensed that the Matthias cult spoke with strange eloquence to the social and emotional upheavals in which they lived their own lives—particularly their struggles to redefine what it meant to be a woman or a man in the new world of the nineteenth century.

Related Characters: Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Before telling the story of how Matthias’s cult came about, authors Johnson and Wilentz provide some social context, which helps to inform the reader about why, in their opinion, the story of Matthias’s cult is important. Here, they argue that Matthias’s cult sheds light on evolving gender dynamics in 19th century American culture.

Matthias’s cult emerges at a time in history when women are beginning to have a more prominent role in American culture. Before the early 1800s, many American communities are small, rural communities largely run by men. The father-figure in each household (typically the eldest male in the family) typically decides everything that happens in the home. In the early 1800s, however, women begin taking on a more important role within domestic settings. Men remain largely in charge in public aspects of society, but women—specifically mothers—begin to run, manage, and organize a family’s private domestic life within

the home. This creates “social and emotional upheavals.” On the social level, there is a shift in society that empowers women to have more power and visibility in the home. On the emotional level, some men—like Matthias—feel displaced and grow resentful at losing some of the power they used to have. His cult attempts to re-establish a community in which a father-figure (Matthias) has complete and total authority in all aspects of his followers’ lives. The cult thus represents Matthias’s angry and dysfunctional attempt to reclaim the power he felt entitled to in society.

Chapter 1: Elijah Pierson Quotes

☛ Young Elijah learned early in life that God had placed men and women into families and social ranks, then governed their destinies according to His inscrutable Providence. Elijah was not to question this visible, worldly order. He had only to apprehend his station within it and then follow the rules of that station. As a child this meant fearing God, denying his own sinful will, and obeying his father and mother. (Later, it would mean being a father and family governor himself.) Elijah [...] knew that if he misbehaved or if the local fathers allowed others to misbehave, God would do terrible things to Morristown.

Related Characters: Benjamin Pierson , Reverend Mr. Richard , Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

The first chapter describes Elijah Pierson’s life story. Elijah Pierson is the first person to join Matthias’s new religion, and he helps Matthias establish the cult. This passage about Elijah’s childhood explains that many rural communities embraced a lifestyle centered on strict hierarchies with men at the top, followed by women, and then children. Here, the authors explain *why* such communities chose to function that way.

Calvinist communities like Elijah’s (based in Morristown, New Jersey) believe that God assigns them fixed roles, both in society and in family units. Some people are leaders—typically, the eldest man leads each family unit, and land-owning men lead society in general. Others are followers, predominantly women, children, and poor men (or laborers). To Calvinists, a godly person honors their role and the typical tasks associated with it, such as cooking and cleaning (for mothers and daughters) and farm work (for

sons and laborers). Elijah's community also believe that if *one* person sins, God punishes the *whole* community. People thus worry that God will punish their loved ones if they do something wrong.

Calvinist communities empower father-figures to make sure that every single person in the community obeys God's rules, believing that this will limit opportunities for individuals to anger God and bring misfortune to the community. This system effectively ensures that the patriarchs (the father-figures who are in charge) remain powerful and authoritative, while women, children, and laborers remain obedient.

●● Elijah Pierson and other pious, upwardly mobile migrants struggled to stake out social and emotional ground between the thoughtless rich and the vicious poor.

Related Characters: Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

When Elijah Pierson reaches adulthood, he leaves his rural farming community and moves to New York City to establish himself as a tradesman. He is successful, but he still struggles to fit in.

In the early 1800s, urban hubs like New York start to expand, drawing in rural people who are searching for work. For many young men (like Elijah), city life is difficult, because urban people tend to embrace very different values than those they grew up with. Elijah's childhood community is deeply religious, modest, and very communal. In the cities, however, people are far more individualistic: they are used to doing what they want, even if others disapprove. Many affluent people (or the "thoughtless rich") live extravagantly, favoring luxury, fun, romantic dalliances, and drinking. More impoverished people (or the "vicious poor"), such as laborers and sex workers, live in cramped squalor, and they often drink and behave in ways that Elijah would consider immoral (such as having sex outside marriage).

Elijah, the "pious, upwardly mobile migrant," feels extremely out of place in this picture: the rich are too extravagant for him, the poor are too wild for him, and city life in general seems far less moral than he's used to. Elijah struggles to embrace the city's culture. His inability to adapt to his new environment ends up isolating him from others, and it

makes him deeply lonely. The authors use Elijah's experience to argue that rural, traditional men often felt alienated from their urbanizing environment, which made them susceptible to marginal religions.

●● Absent, ignorant, and cruel fathers had degraded poor women and children and left a moral void. City missions would fill that void, mainly (in the case of the Female Missionary Society) through the ministrations of middle-class women.

Related Characters: Sarah Stanford (Sarah Pierson), Frances Folger, Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis


After moving to New York City and establishing himself as a successful tradesman, Elijah attempts to overcome his loneliness by throwing himself into New York's emerging evangelical community, where he meets his future wife Sarah and her acquaintance Frances Folger.

The urban evangelical community's values often conflict with the more conservative Calvinist upbringing that Elijah experienced. While traditional Calvinist households were usually patriarchal, evangelicals increasingly favored the idea of mothers running the home. Evangelicals worried about men who abused their authority in the home and used fear tactics to make their wives and children obey them. They were also concerned about young working men who struggled to adapt to city life and took out their frustrations on their families. Mothers, associated with traditionally feminine values like gentleness and nurture, were regarded as better suited to guide and instruct their families in moral matters. This idea also empowered many middle-class evangelicals to enter working class homes and take on the motherly role of guiding the "poor" through missionary work.

According to Johnson and Wilentz, the evangelical agenda effectively destabilized patriarchal (male-privileging) authority in American society, at least to an extent, because it shifted power away from father-figures and towards mother-figures in the home. It also made women more visible in society, as their missionary work took them out of the home and provided them with a social purpose beyond the immediate care of their own family members.

☛☛ Frances Folger and her friends were perfectionists [...] to them, all time was holy, and women and men were being judged every day.

Related Characters: Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger , Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) , Sarah Stanford (Sarah Pierson), Frances Folger

Related Themes: 



Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

When Elijah meets his future wife Sarah, an avid evangelical, he joins New York City's evangelical circle, which centers around a woman named Frances Folger. He soon learns that evangelicals have a far more individualistic notion of religion than he's used to. While Calvinists (like Elijah's childhood community) focus more on communal cohesion, evangelicals focus on personal salvation. To evangelicals, religious practice centers less on adhering to a community and more on personal acts like individual prayer and fasting. Many evangelicals, like Frances Folger, believe that they are being "judged" by God in every action they do, all the time. They argue that it's possible for a genuine Christian to become perfectly sanctified, and that a Christian's salvation is demonstrated through the holiness of their actions. So, they become "perfectionists:" they strive to pray, fast, and even engage in social reform work as fervently as possible. The authors suggest that such perfectionism damages some people's psychological health, arguing that it has particularly devastating effects on both Elijah and Sarah.

☛☛ Elijah and Sarah prayed with the Holy Club for three years, and in 1828 Elijah began talking with the Holy Ghost. He had always been a man of prayer, and had always asked God for help when he had to make some decision. But it was only in 1828 that God began answering him in English.

Related Characters: Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger , Frances Folger , Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) , Sarah Stanford (Sarah Pierson)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Elijah and Sarah are deeply engaged in New York's evangelical community. Their lifestyles now completely

revolve around prayer, fasting, and missionary work.

Evangelicals believe that praying at home (instead of in formal church services) is what primarily enables a person to feel closer to the Holy Ghost. For Christians, the Holy Ghost is one of the three persons of the Holy Trinity (God) and the one whose sanctifying power makes people holy and eventually perfect. The shift towards praying at home (instead of in a church) enables women to take a more prominent role in activities like leading prayers, since most churches would not have ordained women as ministers at this time, yet celebrated women's role as moral guides in the domestic sphere. The "Holy Club" (run by Frances Folger) takes this idea one step further: Frances not only leads prayers for those who live in her home, she invites her wider circle of friends. Moreover, she even brings strangers into her home. She bypasses male authority in the church by resituating devotional practice within her domestic sphere, enabling her—and not a male minister—to lead prayers.

Because Sarah and Elijah believe in praying at home, and in other private, domestic settings like the Holy Club, prayer and other devotional practices occupy much of their lives. Their aspirations to be perfect Christians, however, start to wear on them. Elijah prays and talks to God so often that he starts to believe he hears God (or the Holy Ghost) talking back to him. Johnson and Wilentz suggest that Elijah's obsession with praying and becoming spiritually perfect negatively affects his mental health.

☛☛ The doctors now told him there was nothing they could do. Their diagnosis was consumption brought on by exhaustion and malnutrition: Sarah had literally worked and fasted herself to the edge of death.

Related Characters: Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) , Sarah Stanford (Sarah Pierson)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Sarah and Elijah are living in New York City, where they've spent a few years devoting their lives to becoming perfect evangelical Christians. They have renounced all luxuries, relentlessly fasting, praying, and pursuing missionary work. This lifestyle eventually takes its toll. Sarah grows malnourished from excessive fasting, interspersed with sparse meals of only bread and water, and she ultimately dies. Sarah's illness and death reveal that she has been

trying so hard to be a perfect Christian that she's pushed her body too far. Instead of helping herself be a better person, she's ended up causing her own death. This suggests that fanaticism—intense devotion to a religious goal at all costs—can be dangerous. Elijah's mental health suffers when he starts having delusions (exposing the mental toll of trying too hard to be perfect) and Sarah's physical condition deteriorates until she dies (exposing the physical toll of trying too hard to be perfect). The authors suggest that evangelicalism's perfectionist streak could backfire in this way—far from helping adherents improve themselves, it could do them grave harm, damaging their ability to contribute to society as well.

Matthews does, in fact, suffer from delusions. The authors hint here that Matthews's demanding religious upbringing might have traumatized him as a child, triggering experiences which he interpreted as visions.

☞ When their taunts failed to stifle Matthews's sermons, the men had their boss fire him.

Related Characters: Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite), Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

As a young adult, Robert Matthews moves to New York City in search of work, much like Elijah Pierson did. While Elijah becomes a successful businessman, Matthews struggles as a working-class laborer. He attempts to find work as a carpenter but keeps getting fired. This quote explains why.



Matthews grew up in a strict religious community in which it was common for the town leaders to publicly shame anyone who flouted community standards of morality. When Matthews begins working as a laborer, he notices that other laborers drink heavily. Matthews thinks that it's his moral duty to shame his coworkers for drinking. His coworkers, of course, do not take kindly to Matthews's "sermons." They're used to living in New York City's more secular (less religious) and more individualistic culture, where people feel much freer to act as they wish. Matthews's coworkers are so turned off by Matthews's constant criticism of their behavior that they get Matthews fired. Matthews's behavior shows that he finds it very difficult to adjust to city life: he's stubborn about maintaining his traditional, rural values, and he refuses to change. Matthews's lack of openness to adjusting his lifestyle thus leaves him isolated and unemployed, driving him further into poverty.

The fact that both Matthews and Elijah struggle to find their place in New York City—even though one is rich, and the other is poor—suggests that other young migrants from rural towns probably struggled, too, regardless of social class. Matthews and Elijah thus expose the struggles of rural, religious men to adapt to a rapidly urbanizing country.

Chapter 2: Robert Matthews Quotes

☞ In 1835, an enterprising Manhattan journalist disclosed that, as a boy, Robert Matthews had his own conversations with supernatural spirits and impressed his friends with feats of clairvoyance. [...] It is even more likely that when the adult Matthews began having visions years later, he would have instinctively trusted that they came from God.

Related Characters: Reverend Mr. Beveridge, Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias)

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

Robert Matthews (who, as an adult, ends up changing his name to "Matthias" and running a cult) endures a difficult childhood as an orphan in a strictly Calvinist rural community. The community is run by patriarchs (typically rich, landowning family men) like the Reverend Mr. Beveridge, whose job is to hold everyone in the community accountable by disciplining those who transgress church teachings. The authors portray this as a punishing atmosphere in which people strive, relentlessly, to be good. The community also believe that God reveals himself through natural acts. They interpret thunderstorms and lightning, for example, as signs of God's anger. Many townspeople are eager to receive a sign that God is happy with them, and they start to have "visions" in which they believe that God is talking to them. Matthews also has such visions. This fact is important, as later in the story, several characters are never quite sure if Matthews is delusional or if he's merely a con artist (who pretends to be religious so that he can control others). This quote suggests that

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.

Related Characters: Isabella Laisdell (Matthias's daughter), Johnny Laisdell, Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite), Margaret Wright (Margaret Matthews), Edward Norris Kirk, Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias)

Related Themes:  


Page Number: 77

Explanation and Analysis

After struggling to find work in New York City, Matthews moves his family to Albany, another rapidly urbanizing trade hub. Like Elijah, Matthews seeks solace in an evangelical religious community (run by a minister named Edward Norris Kirk). Unlike Elijah, however, Matthews struggles to adjust his behavior to fit in with the day's emerging evangelical values, which continues to isolate him. Matthews thinks he's being a good evangelical, but he still can't support his family, as he has "unsteady work habits." Nor does Matthews curb his ego. He relies on "self-glorification" instead of exhibiting a modest concern for others. Worst of all, Matthews insists on running his household as an authoritative father-figure who forces his wife and children to obey him out of fear, often beating them ("domestic tyranny"). This domestic arrangement radically conflicts with evangelical values, which prioritize gentle motherly guidance in the home, rather than fatherly authority and fear-based obedience. Matthews thus embodies the kind of patriarch that evangelicals detest: one who forcibly asserts his authority at the expense of his family's well-being.

Margaret [...] stopped by the mayor's office to find out what she could do—and learned that, in the eyes of the law, she could do very little.

Related Characters: Isabella Laisdell (Matthias's daughter), Johnny Laisdell, Margaret Wright (Margaret Matthews), Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis



When Matthews and his wife Margaret are living in Albany,


their domestic situation rapidly deteriorates. Matthews regularly beats Margaret and his children with a whip to make them obey him. At one point, he even throws Margaret out of the house. Worried for her children's safety, Margaret seeks legal guidance to protect herself and her children. It turns out that she can do "very little." She has no grounds for divorce, even though her domestic environment is violent and abusive. Margaret's experience highlights how patriarchal institutions like the United States legal system are at this time, because they reinforce fatherly authority and power. It's technically legal for a man to beat his wife and children as a form of discipline. Margaret's situation exposes that even though social reformers are pushing to give women more authority within the home, women still have very far to go to reach actual equality, especially in systemic (or institutional) contexts like the law.

Chapter 3: The Kingdom Quotes

Boys would work with their fathers, then join their sisters at night to learn Truth at the father's feet. Wives would cheerfully assist the patriarchs, bearing their children, preparing their food, keeping their houses spotlessly clean, and obeying husbands who were their only source of knowledge and material support.

Related Characters: Sylvester Mills, Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite), Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

When Matthews abandons his family in Albany and heads back to New York City, he thinks that he's become a prophet who must start a new religion to save humankind. He recruits two wealthy men to support his cause, Elijah Pierson and Sylvester Mills. Here, he articulates his vision for a perfect society to them.

Matthews thinks that patriarchy (a system that puts father figures in charge) is divine and holy: he believes that it is a father's God-given right to be the sole authority in women and children's lives. Matthews's vision of a perfect society effectively attempts to recapture the lifestyle he knew as a child in Coila, which was exclusively run by men. Matthews's "new" religion thus seems like an attempt to reclaim the patriarchal power that he assumed that he would have as an


adult but never achieved. According to the authors, then, Matthews's behavior suggests that he's bitter about feeling left behind by urban culture, which no longer embraces traditional, rural lifestyles that center on tight-knit family units and absolute fatherly authority. The cult that he ends up starting exemplifies the resentment of men who feel they are losing power in a society that no longer exclusively revolves around them.

Matthews's description also exposes who suffers the most in patriarchal societies. Matthews effectively thinks that women and children should have no freedom, formal education, or access to employment, rendering them completely dependent on (and subservient to) men. Matthews inadvertently exposes some patriarchy's central problems, namely the fact that too much fatherly authority can disenfranchise women and children, limiting their access to any kind of personal freedom.

☛☛ But with Ann's ascendance in Matthias's affections, [Isabella Van Wagenen] coupled her faith with her own notions of what was going on, notions that had to do less with divine patriarchy than with devilish lust.

Related Characters: Catherine Galloway , Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) , Benjamin Folger , Ann Folger , Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

After gathering a few followers for his new religion, Matthews (who now goes by "Matthias") moves everybody to an estate in Hudson County, New York, which he calls "Mount Zion." The estate is owned by wealthy businessman Benjamin Folger. Matthias runs the estate according to the tenets of his "religion," in which he (as the self-appointed father-figure who runs the cult) effectively has complete authority over all of his followers' lives. Within a few months, the household servant (a formerly enslaved person named Isabella Van Wagenen) starts to notice some odd behavior that shakes her faith in Matthias.

Benjamin's wife Ann begins a romantic relationship with Matthias (while she is still married to Benjamin). None of the other cult members question this, assuming that



Matthias is acting on God's will. Isabella Van Wagenen is the only person who's skeptical. She suspects that Matthias might be changing the rules of his religion to satisfy his "devilish lust" for Ann. Ann, too, appears to be acting out of her desire for Matthias, rather than her religious convictions. This suggests several things. First, it suggests that many characters use the cult's environment to experiment with sexual openness (something not openly condoned in society). Second, many cult members' actions appear to be motivated by sexual or romantic desire (rather than religious faith). Third, Isabella Van Wagenen is the most disenfranchised person in the cult (as a Black woman servant), yet she's the only one who's shrewd enough to doubt Matthias's authority. It takes the other characters a long time to catch on to things that Isabella notices immediately. This suggests that although Black women are severely disadvantaged in American society, they are often much more aware, discerning, and capable than others give them credit for.


Chapter 4: The Downfall Quotes

☛☛ The bulk of the Kingdom's household drudge work now fell on Isabella Van Wagenen, who was especially peeved that Mother and Father rose late in the day, which threw her back in her chores.

As life in the cult (or, as the cult members call it, the "Kingdom") falls into a rhythm, it becomes clear that Isabella Van Wagenen—a Black woman who functions as the cult's household servant—bears the brunt of the domestic labor. Other cult members, like Matthias (who informally refers to himself as "Father") and Ann (who starts going by "Mother" after she begins a relationship with Matthias) barely do any work at all. They sleep all day and keep shifting more work onto Isabella's shoulders. The cult is a patriarchal environment, and Isabella's plight exposes how such environments tend to marginalize and oppress people who are undervalued. The cult's most powerful white man (Matthias) and white woman (Ann) effectively exploit the only Black woman (Isabella Van Wagenen). Matthias organizes the cult to recreate the "traditional" way of life he experienced as a child in a rural community run exclusively by father-figures (patriarchs). Many situations that unfold in the cult thus symbolize dysfunctional aspects of patriarchal societies. Here, Isabella's frustrations show that such environments tend to disenfranchise, marginalize, and exploit women of color the most. Isabella's plight thus serves as a subtle commentary on the racism and sexism in "traditional" American society.

Related Characters: Catherine Galloway , Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) , Benjamin Folger , Ann Folger , Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias) , Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth)



Related Themes:  


Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 128

☞ There is too much changing of wives here [...] I have a nice little woman, and I should not much like to lose her.

Related Characters: Mr. Thompson (speaker) , Catherine Galloway , Benjamin Folger , Ann Folger , Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias) , Isabella Laisdell (Matthias's daughter) , Elizabeth Thompson

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

A few months after Matthias establishes his cult on an estate in Hudson County, New York, a man named Mr. Thompson joins the cult, moving his whole family to the estate.

Mr. Thompson doesn't really believe that Matthias is a prophet, but he joins the cult because he likes the idea of men being in charge. This reinforces the idea that the cult symbolizes a patriarchal longing for power. Soon enough, however, Mr. Thompson notices that several cult members (especially Ann, Benjamin, Matthias, Isabella Laisdell, and Catherine Galloway) are exchanging sexual partners on a regular basis. This shows that the cult members are experimenting with sexual openness in a way that is not yet common or accepted in American society. Mr. Thompson decides to leave the cult because he thinks there's "too much changing of wives" going on. He's worried about losing his wife's affections if she becomes sexually involved with other cult members. His decision to leave is motivated by his desire to save his relationship (and not because he's suddenly lost faith or had a change of heart about his religious convictions). Mr. Thompson's behavior reinforces the idea that romantic or sexual urges drive many characters' behavior in the story, not religious beliefs.

☞ On July 28, Matthias, Elijah Pierson, Ann Folger, and Catherine Galloway sat down to supper. At the end of the meal the Prophet spooned out plates of blackberries that he and Pierson had picked that day. Ann Folger ate only two berries. Catherine finished her plate, and Elijah wolfed his down and had another. Matthias had none at all. [...] About four o'clock the next afternoon, Elijah [...] suddenly collapsed. [...] Matthias forbade any doctors or medicine to aid Elijah, and Elijah agreed: prayer and prayer alone could relieve his affliction. [...] In the morning, Ann Folger told the waking disciples that Pierson was dead.

Related Characters: Catherine Galloway , Benjamin Folger , Ann Folger , Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias) , Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth) , Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 138-139

Explanation and Analysis

Elijah's death is one of the most important moments in the story. This passage summarizes the events that cause Elijah to fall ill and die, presumably from eating poisoned berries.

The fact that both Matthias and Ann barely touch the berries suggests that they both instigated the poisoning. This is important, because later in the story, Ann will claim that she's completely innocent and the real culprit is the Black household servant, Isabella Van Wagenen (who's not even mentioned in this event). Ann thinks that blaming Isabella will be easy because Ann knows that her society is quick to unfairly blame people of color for crimes.


Matthias also refuses to seek medical assistance for Elijah, which reinforces the idea that he wants Elijah to die. A few days earlier, Elijah had a seizure during which he made sexual advances towards Ann. The timing of Elijah's poisoning thus suggests that Matthias (who is in a relationship with Ann) is angry and wants to punish Elijah for pursuing Ann. This shows that romantic or sexual reasons (rather than religious ones) motivate Matthias's actions.


Elijah, meanwhile, is so consumed with his desire to achieve religious perfection that he refuses to accept medical help, believing that only prayer will save him. Elijah's longstanding motivations to be as spiritually perfect as possible—so much so that he puts all his trust in prayer—have already driven him to mental delusions, rendered him vulnerable to Matthias's manipulation, and caused his physical health to decline. Now, it becomes clear that his religious convictions

even end up hastening his death. This reinforces the idea that an obsessive passion for religion can be extremely harmful to a person's well-being.

☞ What a devilish shame it is [...] that a woman wants two or three men.

Related Characters: Catherine Galloway (speaker), Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger , Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after Elijah's death, Ann (who has been romantically and sexually involved with Matthias) resumes her relationship with her husband Benjamin (who has most recently been sexually involved with Catherine Galloway). Catherine discovers Ann and Benjamin together in Isabella Van Wagenen's bedroom, and she utters this comment. Catherine explicitly exposes something that the authors have been hinting at throughout: the cult effectively provides a space for its members to experiment with sexual openness. The cult itself is a dysfunctional environment, because sexual relationships are not always clearly consensual. In addition, it often favors the male members' sexual wishes, exposing how patriarchal environments tend to oppress women. Catherine herself can attest to this, as she was initially spurned by Benjamin when he pursued another relationship (with Isabella Laisdell) without Catherine's consent, before resuming his relationship with Catherine. Nonetheless, Catherine's comment "that a woman wants two or three men" implies that some people *do* want to experiment sexually (or live a more sexually open life than traditional marriage conventions allow) but have no other place in society to openly do so. For this reason, the authors suggest, people sometimes resort to dysfunctional environments like cults in order to express themselves sexually.

☞ Finally, Ann came downstairs for breakfast one morning and quietly addressed Benjamin as "husband." [...] Folger leaped at the situation and offered to pay any sum of money to make Matthias leave.

Related Characters: Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) , Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 142-143

Explanation and Analysis

After Elijah's death, Ann's feelings for Matthias start to wane. She starts to have feelings for Benjamin again, and she eventually starts referring to Benjamin as "husband" once again.

For some time now, Ann has been calling Matthias her "husband" (even though she's technically legally married to Benjamin). This marks the turning point in Ann and Benjamin's involvement with Matthias's cult. Ann has been a prominent figure in the cult ever since she developed feelings for Matthias. As soon as she begins to lose romantic interest in Matthias, however, Ann's commitment to the cult wavers. Benjamin, too, who is eager to resume a relationship with Ann, attempts to dismantle the cult as soon as he realizes Ann is interested in him again. Both Ann and Benjamin reveal that they are strongly motivated by their desires, as their romantic interests (and not their faith) determine their commitment to the cult. This suggests that their personal desires play a much larger part in their decision-making process than their faith does, though neither is willing to admit as much.

☞ Privately, [Benjamin Folger] instigated a rumor that Isabella [Van Wagenen] had tried to poison him and his family on the morning when she served up the undrinkable coffee. [...] On Western's advice, she initiated proceedings against Folger for slander, and gathered up signed testimonials attesting to her trustworthiness from several of her former masters and employers.

Related Characters: Margaret Wright (Margaret Matthews), Elijah Pierson (Elijah the Tishbite) , Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger , Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth) , Henry B. Western

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 147-148


Explanation and Analysis

When the cult triggers a public scandal (resulting in Matthias facing criminal charges for fraud, murder, and assault), the other cult members scramble to salvage their own reputations and minimize the risk of facing criminal charges themselves. Benjamin has been financing the cult, and Ann was a prominent cult member in her role as Matthias's partner (or the cult's "Mother"). She also likely knew about Matthias's plan to murder Elijah (because neither she nor Matthias ate the poisoned berries that killed Elijah). Both, therefore, were leading cult members who presumably deserve more blame than other, more marginalized cult members (like the servants). In order to protect themselves, Ann and Benjamin immediately target Isabella Van Wagenen, a Black woman who was the cult's household servant. It's clear that Isabella had very little say in the cult's activities, but the Folgers know that the public will easily accept a narrative that demonizes a woman of color. This exposes how racist and sexist 19th century American culture is.

Isabella Van Wagenen, however, is a fiercely resilient character. Even though the odds are stacked against her, she immediately takes steps to protect herself, collecting evidence and even filing a slander lawsuit against Benjamin. Isabella shows that she's intelligent and shrewd. She even knows how to leverage institutional resources to her own advantage (such as Henry B. Western's legal counsel and the legal system in general). This is something that no other female character is able to accomplish. Matthias's wife Margaret, for example, failed to successfully seek legal support to divorce Matthias, even though he was violent and abusive. The juxtaposition of Margaret's failure with Isabella's success is telling: it suggests that American society deeply underestimates Black women, who often prove themselves to be far more capable and intelligent than others assume.

☛ In effect, the court sustained [Charles] Laisdell: every man should have his rights, and the rights of a husband over the body of his wife superseded those of her father. On that basis, the jury found Matthias guilty.

Related Characters: Judge Ruggles , Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Isabella Laisdell (Matthias's daughter) , Charles Laisdell

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

When Matthias is on trial for assaulting his daughter Isabella Laisdell, her legal husband Charles Laisdell testifies against Matthias. Despite the fact that Matthias did assault Isabella Laisdell, she testifies in support of Matthias, saying that he was just doing his duty. In the end, the court sides with Charles Laisdell.

Charles argues that he did not consent to Matthias hitting his wife. The jury decide that as a married woman, Isabella's husband—and not her father—gets to decide what happens to her body. The court doesn't take Isabella's testimony as seriously as her husband's, and their ruling shows that what really matters in this situation is the fact that Matthias violated *Charles's* consent, not *Isabella's*. It's clear from all this that the court thinks of Isabella's "body" as a man's property. In beating Isabella, Matthias technically damaged Charles's property, and that's why the jury ends up convicting Matthias. The issue, then, isn't the fact that Isabella was beaten. Rather, it's that she was beaten by the wrong person (by her father instead of her husband). All this shows that the law still condones violence against women at this time in history. The trial thus confirms that the 19th century American legal system is decidedly patriarchal (male-privileging), and that this marginalizes women, leaving them at risk for abuse.

Epilogue Quotes

☛ I have got the truth and I know it, and I will crush them with the truth.

Related Characters: Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth) (speaker), Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger , William Leete Stone , Catherine Galloway

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 167-168

Explanation and Analysis



When Matthias's trial becomes a press sensation, many prominent writers publish books on the scandal. A man named William Leete Stone published a book with the Folgers. His book depicts them as innocent victims who were manipulated by Matthias and his servant Isabella Van Wagenen.

As soon as Isabella learns about the book, though, she immediately pushes back. She tells Catherine Galloway that she will "crush [the Folgers] with the truth." Isabella's

comment reveals her fearless, tough, and self-empowering personality: she will not allow herself to become a victim, even though she's working within a racist and sexist society that finds it easy to blame people like her. Isabella's confidence and refusal to back down in a challenge end up serving her well, and they demonstrate how capable she actually is. This suggests that American society's tendency to undermine Black women is a mistake. Like Isabella Van Wagenen, Black women often prove themselves to be far smarter and more resilient than their peers assume they will be.

☛☛ Isabella confirmed all of [Vale's] hunches about the Kingdom's sexual arrangements, and much more besides. [...] He was well aware that the black servant Isabella's word, on its own, would not stand up against the Folgers' given public prejudices. And so whenever possible, he supplemented her narrative with "white evidence" from his interviews and from the public record.

Related Characters: Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger , William Leete Stone , Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth) , Gilbert Vale

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

After the Folgers release a book blaming Isabella Van Wagenen for the cult's criminal activities, Isabella pairs up with a writer named Gilbert Vale to tell her side of the story and clear her name.

Vale's concerns about how he'll successfully salvage Isabella Van Wagenen's reputation expose deep racism in American society. Even though Isabella is telling the truth, her society will not accept her version of events because she is a Black woman. The only way that Vale can make Isabella's story credible to the public is by finding "white evidence" (testimonies from white people that support Isabella's claims). This explicitly shows that the American public tend to (unfairly) consider a white person's testimony as more reliable and trustworthy than a Black person's. This means that the public (at the time) assume that white people are more honest than Black people. This, of course, is a gross falsehood, as the Folgers—and not Isabella—are the ones who are lying.

Vale's book also shows that the Folgers concealed their

sexual antics in their version of the story. Even though Ann (and, to a lesser extent, Benjamin) were among the most sexually experimental people in the cult, they clearly worry about the public shaming them. This shows that people who want to experiment with sexual openness (like Ann) don't feel safe to openly do so in their society. The authors suggest that society's close-minded approach to sexually experimental behavior is a bad thing: because people don't feel safe exploring their sexual desires in their society, they end up seeking out dysfunctional environments (like the cult) to experiment in. Judging by the number of sexual encounters that were not fully consensual in Matthias's cult, such a choice can end up having disastrous consequences.

☛☛ [F]or all their seeming eccentricity, these extremist prophets have a long and remarkably continuous history in the United States; they speak not to some quirk of the moment or some disguised criminal intention, but to persistent American hurts and rages wrapped in longings for a supposedly bygone holy patriarchy.

Related Characters: Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

After describing the rise and fall of Matthias's cult, the authors reflect on what the story says about American society as a whole.

It might seem like Matthias's story is a freak occurrence. The authors, however, argue that people like Matthias have been consistently cropping up since the United States came into existence. This suggests that there is a strong undercurrent of resentment among disenfranchised white men (like Matthias) who are angry about their society becoming less patriarchal (less male-privileging). Such men assume that men are "holy" (or at least more holy than women and children) because they've grown up with an image of God as a father-figure. In seeing their society evolve beyond a picture in which men have total and complete authority, such men feel so angry that they grab for any chance to reinstate their ideal picture of the world, one in which patriarchy is seen as "holy." Matthias's cult symbolizes the dysfunctional rage that such men feel. In noting that cults like Matthias's are quite common in the

United States, the authors suggest that patriarchal male rage is a pervasive and damaging force in American society.

●● And so the world would come to know her as the ex-slave Sojourner Truth.

Related Characters: Robert Matthews (Prophet Matthias), Ann Folger , Benjamin Folger , Isabella Van Wagenen (Sojourner Truth)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

The final line of the book reveals Isabella Van Wagenen's more famous identity. After her involvement with the cult, she successfully sues Benjamin Folger for slander and uses

her money to start a new life as the famous activist "Sojourner Truth." Sojourner Truth later delivers a speech entitled "ain't I a woman?" that has a dramatic impact on American culture. In her speech, she points out that her society's attempts to empower women routinely overlook women of color, which is why she asks, "ain't I a woman?" Sojourner Truth's attempts to expose the unique oppression that Black women face in American society ends up spurring an intellectual movement called "intersectionality" (which attempts to factor in all the ways a person is uniquely oppressed, given their gender, race, class, and situation in life). Today, this concept is central in contemporary race and gender studies.

Isabella/Sojourner thus ends up becoming the character whom history best remembers and the one who has the greatest impact on American culture. With their conclusion, the authors establish Isabella/Sojourner as the story's true heroine, reinforcing the idea that Black women are a tremendous asset to American culture.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: TWO PROPHETS AT KIRTLAND

In 1835, Prophet Matthias, who has recently been released from prison (he was imprisoned for assaulting his daughter), travels alone to the Mormon settlement at Kirtland. He arrives to find a crude colony in which an unimpressive church is being constructed. Matthias introduces himself as a Jewish minister named Joshua to Joseph Smith, the prophet of the Mormon Church. The pair exchange their insights about God. Smith says that he's translated God's sacred records into the *Book of Mormon*. Meanwhile, Matthias rambles about his visions, in which God tells him that the United States is a failed kingdom that did not bring equality and freedom to all, and that the Mormons should flee.

Matthias successfully managed to convince others to believe in his visions before, including his (now deceased) follower Elijah Pierson and Pierson's church group, but Smith isn't convinced. Nonetheless, Smith lets Matthias preach to his Mormon group. Later that day, the congregation figures out that Matthias is a convicted fraud and murderer. Unfazed, Matthias tells the group that he's a direct descendant of Jesus Christ. Smith decides that an evil spirit has invaded Matthias's soul, and he tells Matthias to leave.

In the early 1800s, shortly after the Civil War, the United States begins to emerge as a world power. Around this time, the emerging "Yankee middle class" begins driving American culture's moral agenda. Such people, including revivalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney, spread "Finneyite" ideas celebrating reform and personal freedom. According to this view, any coercive behavior—including slavery and patriarchy—is wrong. This new moral agenda conflicts with many traditional ideals in the Southern states. It's around this time that widespread occult, supernatural, and religious speculation takes hold among poor, uneducated Americans like Matthias and Smith.

Joseph Smith founded the Mormon church (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) in the 1820s–1830s, based on reported angelic visitations. Smith established the first Mormon headquarters in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1831. By opening the book with Matthias seeking out Smith, the book places Matthias in the same fringe religious category, outside the mainstream of American Christianity. Matthias's disillusionment with the United States also suggests that he is struggling to adapt to a changing society: despite the industrial economic boom in the United States in the 1800s, Matthias feels that he and other religious people are marginalized.



Matthias's religious beliefs are decidedly unorthodox—especially his emphasis on personal visions and his belief that Jesus is his ancestor (neither of which would be supported by mainstream Christianity). Even Smith and his followers find Matthias's ideas, and especially his past, suspect—showing that in an era that saw widespread religious experimentation in the U.S., Matthias is more radical than average.



The United States is clearly in a time of rapid evolution: industrialization, urban development, and a rising middle class begin to have more influence in society, marginalizing rural farming communities. At the same time, the Second Great Awakening—a movement marked by Protestant religious revivals and upheaval in traditional denominations—echoed these broader cultural changes by emphasizing individual choice and social transformation. The preaching of Charles Finney, which downplayed older Calvinist emphases on personal sin and the need for supernatural conversion, was one expression of Great Awakening religion. Matthias's and Smith's more marginal sectarianism is another stream of the Awakening—one sometimes favored by rural, less educated Americans who were struggling to adapt to sweeping cultural changes.



In contrast to the Finneyite moral agenda, Matthias and Smith's rhetoric celebrates "fixed social relations and paternal power." It's hostile to Finneyite ideas like reforming people's morals, celebrating everybody's personal freedom, and growing wealth through trade. Both Matthias and Smith proclaim themselves as the dominant patriarchs of the world. They cling to "grim" Old Testament values of fatherly authority, respect for the family, and poor, rural living.

The authors contrast a "Finneyite" approach to religion with that of figures like Matthias and Smith, portraying the former as progressive and the latter as regressive. In particular, they suggest that Matthias and Smith wanted to maintain a patriarchal approach to religion (meaning that men hold primary authority) in contrast to a Finneyite approach that de-emphasized such authority. The authors also characterize this more familial, less urbanized ethos as backward and repressive.



In the 1830s, the press sensationalizes Matthias's **cult** (the "Kingdom of Matthias") for its preoccupation with murder and sexual crime. Yet, the story of Matthias's cult *also* tells an interesting social story about American society. It exposes one way in which poor 19th-century Americans attempted to resist the social and religious dominance of emerging, affluent middle classes.

The book hints at the sensational aspects of the cult surrounding Matthias, which coming chapters will explore. However, the book's broader focus is sociological—that is, the authors believe Matthias's story reveals something about social transformation in 19th-century America, especially the resistance of those who felt left behind by the ascendant middle class.



CHAPTER 1: ELIJAH PIERSON

It's a little odd that Elijah Pierson ends up joining Matthias's cult, because Elijah is an avid Finneyite, who celebrates the progressive agenda of ensuring personal freedom for all people. However, when Elijah's wife, Sarah, dies, his faith takes a darker turn. Before that, Pierson is born in 1786, and he grows up in New Jersey. He comes from a family of colonists (who arrived in the Americas in 1666) known for spreading American Puritanism in the northeastern United States.

The story shifts to describe the life story of Elijah Pierson, the first man to join Matthias's cult. Based on Elijah's loss of his wife, this passage hints that a person's personal struggles can lead them to adopt a more pessimistic or even dysfunctional approach to religion. Elijah's religious trajectory is also surprising given his Puritan upbringing. New England Puritans placed more emphasis on local church communities, orthodoxy, and close-knit family life than idiosyncratic visions.



Elijah grows up with strict religious rules in his household, and his family sets up the first Presbyterian church in Morristown, New Jersey. In the church, the Reverend Mr. Richard preaches a Calvinist brand of Christianity, which focuses on fearing God, obeying parents, and downplaying individualism. Calvinists believe that if any members of the congregation act sinfully (by indulging in their personal whims and desires), God will punish the whole town.

Presbyterianism is a branch of Christianity that is rooted in the sixteenth-century Calvinist branch of the Protestant Reformation. Traditionally, Calvinists stressed not just individual holiness, but community holiness, too. Thus, if individual church members behaved sinfully, the entire community could be subject to God's judgment. This also meant that fathers were viewed as authoritative, responsible for teaching their households to obey the Bible's standards for holiness. The book suggests that Elijah's Presbyterian upbringing inclined him to be sympathetic to the patriarchy he'd later find in Matthias's cult.



Elijah's congregation sits in order of wealth, with the most expensive pews being near the front, although the community allows those who are elderly and hard of hearing to sit right at the front. As the family patriarch, Elijah's father, Benjamin Pierson, is responsible for the whole community's moral well-being. In 1796, Benjamin disciplines another man's wife for smoking too much opium. Benjamin also provides a church job for his destitute brother-in-law Usual Crane and supports Crane's widow after Crane dies. From the outside, this community looks like an unjust system in which women, slaves, and the poor must defer to the community's patriarchs. From the inside, however, it likely feels like a community that looks after its members.

Like many 19th-century young men from rural areas, Elijah leaves his home as a young adult to work as a clerk in New York City. By 1820, he owns his own merchant store on Pearl Street, selling goods from trade ships to country general stores. He's become part of the emerging urban middle class. As a religious man with family-oriented country values, Elijah finds himself uncomfortably wedged between wealthy, indifferent people who drink and keep mistresses, and desperately poor drunks and prostitutes who live in squalor. Elijah keeps to himself, and he finds himself affluent, chaste, and unmarried by the time he's in his 30s.

Elijah finds solace in religion. In 1819, he joins Brick Presbyterian Church and begins volunteering there. Elijah begins supporting the church's evangelical missions in poor communities. Evangelicals believe that the poor aren't inherently sinful, but they make bad choices because they're ignorant and need spiritual education. Evangelicals place a lot of importance on learning from loving mothers rather than obeying strict fathers. Middle-class evangelical women begin making domestic visits into poor people's homes to act as moral guides, believing that bad morals stem from absent or cruel fathers.

Despite the evangelicals' emphasis on women, male clergymen still remind their congregations that evangelical women's roles are to assist and support men. They continue advancing a patriarchal picture in which God is seen as the ultimate "father" figure. Several ministers fear the idea of their congregations rejecting fatherly authority too much, since it questions their own power, and this is exactly what happens. Many evangelicals—including Elijah Pierson—start believing that too much power, cruelty, and intimidation from male authority figures in society causes problems and encourages sinfulness.

Elijah's childhood community has upsides and downsides. On the upside, there is a strong ethos of community: the community's leaders are responsible for looking after those who are disempowered (such as the poor and elderly) to make sure that nobody has to fend for themselves. On the downside, it is authoritarian: everybody must obey the community's father figures at all times, meaning that women, children, and people of color have little power.



Throughout the early 1800s, the rise of industry draws rural people to urban hubs like New York City to take jobs in manufacturing and trade. As a young adult, Elijah leaves his close-knit, religious, farming community and struggles to fit in among people who don't value religion and morality in the same way. The book suggests that by his 30s, Elijah has failed to adapt to urban culture.



Church membership helps Elijah feel more established in his new environment. In contrast to the congregation Elijah grew up in, though, Brick Presbyterian is more engaged in the social reform efforts that became popular among 19th-century evangelical Protestants. Some of these reform movements empowered women and emphasized mothers' moral influence in the home. Women, therefore, play a more active role in church life than those in Elijah's childhood church did.



Even though evangelicals empower mothers to morally guide their families, evangelicalism remains "patriarchal" in the sense that churches are led by male clergy, and God is worshiped as "Father." Nonetheless, the authors suggest that as women become more visible in missionary work, male authority gets questioned and even eroded somewhat in broader society.



One evangelical woman pushing this agenda is Elijah's future wife, Sarah Stanford. Sarah's mother dies when she's four, and her father preaches in New York's prisons. By the time Sarah meets Elijah, she is widowed and has a young daughter. Elijah's drawn to Sarah's strength and competence. They get married in May 1822. Elijah joins Sarah's congregation, and they begin forging out an evangelical life together, centered on work, visits to the poor, and prayer at home. Sarah takes on the role of Elijah's moral compass and caretaker in their "mother-centered household." Unlike authoritarian father figures in his hometown, Elijah likely feels quite lost and unsure about how to run his daily life after his wife dies.

In 1825, Elijah crosses paths with a radical evangelical woman named Frances Folger. Frances thinks that luxury is sinful, and she chastises a woman in her congregation for wearing a feathered hat to church. Frances also starts challenging male power and authority in both poor and wealthy households. Her group even enters wealthier peoples' homes unannounced to pray, with the aim of reforming their families. Elijah follows Sarah to one such event at Frances's cousin Benjamin Folger's home, where almost 40 people are praying in the living room. They begin to condemn church rituals, as they believe that private prayer enables them to commune more directly with the Holy Ghost.

In 1828, Elijah releases a pamphlet (mostly written by Sarah) that objects to the church's tendency to collect money (during services and from renting out pews of different price levels). They believe that collecting money over-privileges the wealthy and makes the poor feel unwelcome. Frances, Sarah, Elijah and several other prominent evangelicals set up a more formal religious community in Bowery Hill. They sell their worldly possessions, reject unnecessary luxuries, wear modest clothing, and live simply on bread and water. Elijah begins fasting on weekends, believing that it helps him connect more directly with the voice of God. He begins preaching sermons about this way of life.

Although many of the city's other evangelicals distance themselves from such practices, the group nonetheless fosters enough connections to fund a mission to convert Jewish people, a campaign to halt Sunday postal service, and another mission to end prostitution. They begin following sex workers home from prison and set up a preaching station in New York's notorious Five Points neighborhood. Disenfranchised young women, meanwhile, see that they might get financial support from such middle-class evangelicals by peddling stories about abusive men who forced them into sexual trade.

Elijah and Sarah's domestic life illustrates the shift that the book has just presented—from a patriarchal household to a "mother-centered" one, in which Sarah makes most of the domestic decisions and exercises moral authority. In fact, Elijah grows so used to relying on Sarah that later, after she dies, he doesn't know where to turn—showing how dramatically his view of family has changed.



Frances Folger pushes the boundaries around the religious power that women are allowed to have in American society. In this respect, Frances exemplifies gender shifts in 19th-century evangelicalism. By emphasizing informal, personal prayer over formal, church-mediated prayer, evangelicals like Frances undermine the traditionally patriarchal (male-dominated) character of church and society.



Elijah, Sarah, and Frances's religious zeal starts to take on a perfectionist character: that is, they believe that it's possible for a Christian to live a perfectly holy life. For example, they think that good Christians are detached from the world, so they take this idea to an extreme, rejecting all luxuries. To live this way, they also separate from traditional Christian communities and start their own, showing their openness to radical forms of religion.



The fact that other evangelicals distance themselves from Sarah, Elijah, and Frances underscores the radical nature of their beliefs. Not only do Sarah, Elijah, and Frances strive for perfect holiness in their own lives, they also attempt to recruit and reform people whom they see as sinful. This twin emphasis on perfectionism and social reform illustrates some of the ways 19th-century evangelicalism tried to adapt to an urbanizing culture.



Elijah and his group begin recruiting sex workers and sending them to be reformed at “Female Asylum House,” which they run in New York City’s Bowery Hill neighborhood. Members of the asylum include its matron, a reformed sex worker named Mrs. Bolton, and a Black servant named Isabella. The Asylum is founded on the principle of discovering God through Christian love. What unfolds, however, is an “unsettling surprise.”

On June 20, 1830, Elijah believes that he hears the voice of God talking to him. The voice proclaims him “Prophet Elijah of Tishbe,” and Elijah believes that he must prepare the world for “the coming of the Lord.” Sarah has fallen dangerously ill from excessive fasting, and eventually, she dies with Elijah and his followers by her side. Around 200 people attend Sarah’s funeral, and Elijah declares that he will raise her from the dead. He prays and preaches for an hour. Eventually, a drop of blood emerges from Sarah’s nostril. A doctor at the funeral explains that this means her corpse is rotting.

Elijah claims that over the next week, Sarah rises from her coffin and appears several times. Apparently, Sarah wants to make sure that Elijah knows how to take care of himself without her, and she wants to urge Elijah to continue their missionary work. While grieving, Elijah throws himself into increasingly fervent prayer over the next several months, during which he believes that Jesus appears and tells him that Sarah will return and bear him a son, after which they’ll all ascend to heaven together. Elijah’s followers begin to abandon him, one by one, believing him to be deranged.

By this time, a man named John McDowell is running day-to-day operations at Female Asylum House (now called “Magdalen House of Refuge”), while Elijah serves as a founding director. A man named Arthur Tappan from the evangelical community serves as Magdalen House’s president, but he soon leaves. Shortly after, John McDowell severs ties with Magdalen House as well, citing doubts about Elijah’s sanity. In 1831, Elijah shuts down his merchant business and devotes himself to preaching, praying, and fasting full-time, from a house near Fourth Street and Bowery in Manhattan, along with Frances Folger; her husband, Rueben; their servant, Isabella Van Wagenen; and Mrs. Bolton (former matron of Magdalen House).

Elijah continues to denounce churches that charge rent for pews and collect money at services. His followers share pamphlets telling people to come and hear “Elijah the Prophet” preach. Elijah preaches that prayer and fasting will enable his followers to heal sick people, deter evil spirits, and resurrect the dead. About a year later, in 1832, a man named Matthias knocks on Elijah’s door.

Elijah and his friends set up an asylum to reform sinners, pulling others—like a Black woman named Isabella Van Wagenen, who will become central to the story—into their circle. The authors’ hint that what unfolds is “unsettling” suggests that the group’s efforts to embody Christian perfection will backfire.



Elijah the Tishbite was a prophet of Israel in the Old Testament’s Books of Kings. Elijah’s identification with the biblical prophet, Sarah’s fasting-induced death, and Elijah’s prayer for Sarah’s resurrection all illustrate how far they’ve passed outside the Christian mainstream. The authors portray these beliefs as not just extreme but disconnected from reality.



Elijah’s vision of Sarah returning from the dead to check on his domestic affairs reinforces the idea that Sarah ran the home, in contrast to traditional family structures where the father-figure ran the home. Elijah’s subsequent delusions suggest, as before, that extreme religious beliefs can harm a person’s mental health.



Elijah’s mental health declines so much that many people distance themselves from his endeavors. His religious devotion ends up causing his missionary work and his career as a merchant to collapse. This suggests that Elijah’s attempts to fulfill an extreme religious ideal also damage his capacity to function as a contributing member of society. Elijah’s religious devotion is thus beginning to consume him in an unhealthy way that isolates him from all but a handful of people in his life.



In claiming that he and his followers can perform miracles, Elijah appears to consider himself a Christ figure, suggesting that he’s growing increasingly delusional and out of touch with reality. Building tension, the book connects Elijah’s and Matthias’s paths at this ominous point.



CHAPTER 2: ROBERT MATTHEWS

Like Elijah Pierson, Robert Matthews goes to New York from the countryside as a young man in search of work, and he finds himself turning increasingly to faith to cope with the transition. Unlike Elijah, Robert is not successful in business. Instead, he erratically pursues various denominations of Christianity. During this time, he starts physically abusing his wife and children. Soon after, everybody in his life abandons him. Robert wanders around the city in search of work, and he eventually winds up in Elijah's home on Fourth Street.

Robert Matthews is born in 1788. He grows up on a country farm in a village called Coila, in New York State. His Scottish immigrant family practices a strict form of Calvinism. They harshly oppose pro-reform sects of Scottish Calvinism, and they reject most recreational activities beyond fasting, prayer, and reading the Bible. When he's around 12 years old, Robert attends his community's most important gathering: an annual event called the Lord's Supper. During the event, the ministers publicly shame each person in the community who has failed to comply with the congregation's religious standards.

Ministers reprimand people for activities like public swearing, wearing dirty clothes, and attending sermons given by people who aren't in their community. It's difficult for anybody to sway too far from the community's strict religious rules without being punished. Although the community's religious leader, Reverend Mr. Beveridge, creates a stressful, punishing atmosphere in his community, he favors Robert as a boy and even blesses him.

In contrast to Elijah Pierson's childhood church (where rich townfolk pay more to sit at the front), Robert Matthews's church seats rich and poor people together. However, similar to Elijah Pierson's community, Matthews's community emphasizes fatherly authority. Each household's father runs the family, leads prayers, and must be obeyed. Men run all religious and social events, while women and children stay largely silent. Sometimes, the townfolk claim to have visions and direct interactions with God, though ministers tend to under-record cases involving women and children. Despite this, Robert believes he has several visions throughout his childhood. He grows up believing that he'll experience many hardships but will ultimately become the master of his own household.

The book began by introducing a character named "Matthias." Now, the authors revisit Matthias's life story. Matthias's real name is Robert Matthews. Like Elijah, Robert Matthews grows up in a rural environment, struggles to adapt to urban life, fails to find a home in mainstream religion, and ends up driving people away from him. This suggests that, like Elijah's, Matthews's extreme religious devotion has a disastrous effect on his and his family's lives.



Similar to Elijah Pierson's childhood, Matthews grows up in a close-knit Calvinist community. Scottish Presbyterians placed great importance on the sacrament called the Lord's Supper, or communion. If a person was believed to be practicing immorality with no intention of repenting, that person would be barred from the Lord's Supper observance. The authors hint that these practices fueled Matthews's later extremism.



The book portrays the community as strict and authoritarian, gaining compliance more through fear and shame than through genuine belief. It also suggests that Robert's religious upbringing was psychologically damaging and prepared him to abuse others likewise.



Matthews's upbringing was marked by male authority in church and at home; he expected to exercise the same authority one day. Though such Calvinist communities generally downplayed the role of supernatural experiences like visions, they weren't unheard of; in this respect, Matthews's church, and his own visionary experiences, reflect the individualist streak of America's Second Great Awakening.



Matthews's parents die when he's about seven, and he grows up working for a neighbor as a farm laborer. As a teenager, he grows ill and anxious. An elderly member of Robert's church takes Robert in and teaches him carpentry for a couple years. In 1808, Matthews abruptly leaves town and heads for New York City. He settles into a tenement in the impoverished Lower East Side neighborhood with the Wright family (also from Coila), and he begins diligently attending church. Robert keeps getting fired from carpentry jobs because he has a habit of angrily chastising his colleagues for "sinful" behavior such as drinking.

In 1811, Matthews has an outburst and beats his sister-in-law, and the Wrights send him back home to Coila. Robert's community set him up with a home, a store, and some land, and Robert becomes a shopkeeper. He occasionally travels to New York to pick up wholesale supplies for his store. During these trips, he courts one of the Wright family's daughters, Margaret Wright. They marry in 1813 and have a son a year later in Coila. Since Matthews is an orphan and has no father figure of his own to obey, he become the head of his own household (and a respected member of his community) at the young age of 26.

Matthews's business fares well at first, until an overambitious plan to expand his store sends him (and several others in his community who invested in his business) into bankruptcy. Having lost his good reputation, Matthews moves his family back to Manhattan and pursues work as a carpenter. After a few years, Matthews starts his own carpentry business, but his family is plagued by illness while living in cramped, unsanitary quarters. His two young sons die, and then he falls ill himself. He has to move his family to a cheaper, more cramped tenement. Matthews begins having headaches and violent outbursts. He also begins having confused episodes, lashing out, and beating Margaret and their children.

Around this time, Matthews stumbles across an African Methodist church. His Calvinist faith is strongly anti-racist, and he's used to participating in multiracial congregations, so he joins. At this church, people have dramatic experiences where they feel directly touched and saved by the Holy Spirit. Calvinists usually reject such behavior, but Matthews is deeply moved by it, and he thinks he's witnessing pure faith. Matthews begins believing that he's a Hebrew prophet. Matthews is inspired by a newspaper editor and politician named Mordecai Manuel Noah, who claims to be the Jewish messiah. Margaret thinks that Matthews is going insane.

As with Elijah's childhood community, Matthews's congregation displays a strong community spirit: they take in orphans like Matthews and look after them, rather than leaving them to fend for themselves. Matthews also struggles to adapt to city life which is far less religious and more individualistic than he's used to. People don't react well to being publicly shamed in the city: they're used to doing what they want, rather than what their community wants. Matthews's inability to embrace such individualistic urban values isolates him from others.



Matthews's violent outburst suggests that his inability to adapt to city life triggers dysfunctional anger, which he takes out on those more vulnerable. Despite his struggles, his rural community displays its community spirit once more, re-establishing him as a business owner and head of his own household. Matthews goes from being poor, isolated, and unemployed in the city, to being well off, supported, and powerful in his rural community. According to the book, Matthews comes to favor rural life because it gives him what he thinks men deserve in society: power, authority, and success.



Matthews struggles to adapt to urban life, where there's less built-in support than he enjoyed in his rural upbringing. This appears to make him feel powerless, and he copes by lashing out at his family. This suggests that when men struggle to fulfill the expectations placed on them by a patriarchal society, it's sometimes their dependents who suffer most.



Like Elijah, Matthews copes with an unfamiliar urban culture by seeking refuge in a church. Interestingly, though, this church is much different from his Scottish Calvinist upbringing. Much bigger than the racial difference is the Methodist emphasis on immediate encounters with the Holy Spirit (which, for Calvinists, is ordinarily experienced through the church's preaching and sacraments). Like Elijah's, Matthews's naturally intense devotion is taken in some disturbing directions in this new environment.



Matthews moves his family back to upstate New York, where they float around different towns, largely relying on charity from relatives. Margaret wants to leave Matthews, but her community convinces her not to. Around the same time, Noah starts dressing in a king costume, and he tries to build a vessel (which he calls Noah's Ark) that he wants to sail to Manhattan, filled with "creepy" things. The project fails, and Noah returns to a career in politics, but Matthews keeps talking about it. Margaret dutifully (but miserably) follows Matthews to Albany as he searches for work. Albany is evolving into a thriving commercial and political city, filled with a mix of working-class people and affluent merchants.

Matthews joins Albany's North Dutch church, which is less harsh and fiery than the Calvinist church of his upbringing. The Reverend is Charles Finney, and his sermons focus on being loving and helping the poor. Moved by these ideas, Matthews strives to be more loving, and his violent outbursts decrease for a while. But when the whole family contracts smallpox and their youngest son dies, Matthews reacts by repeatedly beating Margaret with a whip. Matthews believes that Margaret is possessed by an evil spirit that made the family sick, and that he needs to whip the spirit out of her.

Around this time, a minister named Edward Norris Kirk is ejected from his Presbyterian church by politicians who think his sermons are too intense. He moves to Albany, becomes an avid Finneyite, and begins preaching from North Dutch Church, until he founds Albany's Fourth Presbyterian Church. Matthews is drawn to Kirk's sermons. Kirk delivers lengthy evangelical sermons (sometimes lasting all day long and well into the night). He preaches that the Calvinist focus on obeying the patriarchal social order restricts people's freedom. Kirk, instead, sees women as the family's spiritual core. Many women are drawn to his sermons.

The similarities between Elijah's and Matthews's difficult transitions to urban life imply that their stories are not isolated incidents: it's probable that many young men struggled to adapt when shifting from close-knit, religious, rural communities to anonymous, culturally diverse big city life. Matthews's life in Albany reinforces this idea: other men, like Noah, also display odd behavior (like dressing in a king costume) to reclaim something they lost when transitioning from rural life (where they had a predictable role to fill in their communities) to urban life (where they have no obvious role). Margaret suffers tremendously in her marriage, but her patriarchal (male-privileging) values make her feel that she should continue to obey Matthias. This underscores how damaging patriarchal values can be to the people they marginalize, like women.



When Matthews encounters Charles Finney's preaching (which emphasizes social change over supernatural experiences), his anger and fringe ideas are subdued for a while. Although Matthews attempts to embrace this approach to religion, he struggles to feel empowered by it, lapsing back into his violent and abusive behavior when life is hard. This suggests that Finney's approach doesn't resolve Matthews's sense of alienation from broader society.



Like Finney, Kirk adhered to Second Great Awakening ideals of revival—that is, personal and social religious renewal. Because revivalism emphasized the individual's choice to follow God, it deemphasized the authority of churches and, to an extent, even fathers. Accordingly, Kirk and similar preachers created room for mothers—instead of fathers—to become the domestic anchors of family life. This weakened the patriarchal tone of American Protestantism.



Matthews begins attending Kirk's sermons, and he starts believing that he must make people accept religion in their hearts (and not out of obedience or fear). He begins hounding other carpenters about their drinking and swearing, and he loses most of his work. The family begins to starve, but Margaret is too afraid to complain in case Matthews beats her again. Although Matthews thinks that he's being a good evangelical, he's actually doing the opposite: he glorifies himself, he can't find steady work to empower his family, and he beats his wife and children. Kirk's followers notice this, and they reject Matthews's efforts to become more involved with their church.

This rejection humiliates Matthews, who thinks he's being mistreated because he's poor. He stops shaving and starts believing that he has visions from God about starting his own religion. Margaret grows increasingly worried about how to feed their children. One day, Matthews runs into the town hall, yelling at everyone that they're sinners. Then he tries to lock Margaret in their home and forcibly baptize her. She resists, telling Matthews that her Finneyite church would not condone such behavior.

The next day, Matthews goes to Finney's church. He wants to teach the congregation about the "true" path. The congregation mostly just ignores him. Matthews refuses to leave, and he starts preaching to the congregation. They silently filter out while he's talking, and the last person just turns off the lights, leaving Matthews in the dark. Matthews believes that this is a sign from God that a great flood is coming. He runs home and tries to get his family to flee, but Margaret refuses. Then, Matthews runs away with three of their sons. Margaret's church community spread word of an insane man who's kidnapped his children, and two days later, they find Matthews. The community rescues the children, confines Matthews inside a poor-house for insane people, and collects money to help Margaret.

Two weeks later, Matthews is released and returns home. A forgiving Margaret welcomes him back. She hopes that Matthews has changed, but he soon lapses back into abusive behavior. Margaret consults a lawyer and learns that she has no legal grounds to divorce Matthews. She does learn, however, that Matthews can be imprisoned for two months for beating her. After Matthews and Margaret have a bad fight, the police arrest Matthews, but they don't charge him, citing lack of evidence. Margaret has to start begging in order to feed her family.

Kirk's evangelical values clearly conflict with the more patriarchal religious values that Matthews grew up with. Though Matthews tries to be a good evangelical by encouraging others to convert, he defaults to shaming others' behavior instead of using loving persuasion. This indicates that he doesn't successfully adapt to emerging evangelical ideals. Matthews's inability to adapt once again leads to abusive behavior and isolation from others.



Matthews is unable to see that his inability to change his values (which center on making his family obey him out of fear) isolates him from others around him. He's so resistant to change that he even starts to blame others, accusing them of mistreating him when they reject him. He not only abuses Margaret but imagines starting a new religion where he'll be free from pressure to adapt to others' ideals and can freely impose his own.



Matthews's inability to see the faults in his own behavior (primarily his inability to grow, change, and adapt to society's evolving values) causes him to believe that he's in the right, and everybody else is in the wrong. In fact, when others reject him, he interprets this not merely as disagreement, but catastrophe. Matthews's stubborn belief in his status as a prophet causes extremely dysfunctional behavior, driving him to delusions (like believing that God talks to him) and criminal behavior (like kidnapping his sons). This suggests that Matthews's religious zeal negatively affects his mental health, as well as his ability to function in family life and within society.



Margaret's struggles to free herself from an abusive marriage expose how oppressed women are in American society: she has no legal grounds to escape her situation or distance herself from her violent husband. Margaret's situation suggests that although American society is shifting away from a patriarchal (male-privileging) model in family and domestic life, it still marginalizes women in institutional contexts like the legal system and law enforcement.



Matthews begins thinking that rich people and preachy women are sinful. He believes that ministers like Kirk are evil because they encourage women to stop obeying men. He also starts believing that he resembles a biblical figure named “Matthias,” who’s supposed to cleanse the church of people who betray Christ. In 1831, Matthews abandons his family and travels to Rochester—the center of the Finneyite evangelical movement—to announce himself as “Matthias, Prophet of the God of the Jews.”

Two of Matthews’s brothers also settled in Rochester in the early 1800s. One brother, called John (or J. L. D. Mathies) is a painter who abandoned Calvinism and also dislikes evangelicals. He paints portraits of mystics and Native American warriors. He ends up becoming a landlord in Rochester to support his art. The other brother, James, was a poet and heavy drinker who died some years ago. James disliked overly religious people as well. Matthews arrives in Rochester and briefly reunites with John, but they have an argument, and Matthews leaves Rochester within two weeks of arriving.

Matthews wanders around New York for several months, before returning to Albany, boasting about having converted thousands of people to his new religion. Upon arriving, he seeks out Margaret, but she refuses to take him back unless he finds work, so he leaves for good. Matthews continues wandering and eventually winds up in New York in 1832, as an unkempt man with a wild beard and a bad temper. He seeks out Margaret’s family, but they reject him for abandoning Margaret. Matthews angrily leaves their house, calling them all sinners. He ends up roaming the streets and preaching by day, and sleeping in a boarding house near the Battery at night.

Another lodger in the boarding house, named William Leete Stone, recalls Matthias saying that he’s been chosen as a vessel for God’s word, and that his wild, crazy beard is very important to his mission. Stone believes that Matthias is a fraud who’s started to believe his own lies. Matthias even tells another boarder that he’s over 1,800 years old. Matthews decides he wants to publish his ideas, so he seeks out an anti-evangelical newspaper man named Gilbert Vale. Vale refuses, believing that Matthews is a lunatic. Eventually, Matthews hears about strange religious activities going on at Bowery Hill, so he makes his way there and knocks on Elijah Pierson’s door on May 5, 1832.

Matthews is so resentful about losing the power and authority that he assumed he would have as an adult man that he begins targeting others who are gaining power and influence in society, namely women (who are gaining greater status in evangelicalism) and upwardly mobile urban people (who increasingly influence public life in the way that rural father-figures used to). As before, Matthews’s resentment towards such people shows that his inability to embrace evolving social values drives his dysfunctional behavior. He relies increasingly on his religious fervor to validate himself and feel more important, causing him to start believing that he’s a prophet whose job is to restore the traditional (male-privileging) social order.



Matthews’s strained relationship with his brothers shows that his obsession with religion damages his relationships with everyone around him: even his biological family members reject him for being too religiously extreme. This reinforces the idea that Matthews’s religious commitments—like Elijah’s—continue to isolate rather than empower him.



Matthews’s religious views continue to derail his life: he starts having delusions about being a powerful prophet, fails to reconnect with his wife and children, and he winds up homeless. Despite the fact that his own behavior causes these problems in his life, Matthews is convinced that other people’s sinful behavior is ruining his life. He’s unable to accept the changing society around him, so he reacts by assuming society is marginalizing him.



Stone and Vale’s encounters with Matthews underscore that his religious views are both bizarre and extreme. Throughout the book, others remain unclear over whether Matthews is just a power-hungry fraud who intentionally peddles strange religious ideas to manipulate others into helping him reclaim his lost patriarchal authority, or whether he’s actually mentally traumatized and really believes in his religious vision. Stone and Vale’s reflections draw out this ambiguity. Meanwhile, the book draws Matthews’s and Elijah’s threads of the story together.



CHAPTER 3: THE KINGDOM

Elijah Pierson has redesigned his home to make it suitable for prayer. All extravagant furnishings have been removed and replaced with simple items. Nonetheless, Matthews (who now goes by Matthias) can tell that the home is a rich man's house. Matthias thinks that Pierson's religious behavior is all wrong: Pierson seems weak and soft-minded, he prays for women, he grieves lost children, and he cries a lot. Matthias tells Pierson that the real religious task is to save the world from sinners, preachy women, and anyone who puts men down.

Matthias explains that God spoke to him and turned him to the "Prophet Matthias" on June 20, 1830. Elijah is shocked: he recalls that God spoke to *him* on the exact same day and made him "Elijah the Tishbite." Matthias convinces Elijah that they are both prophets on the same mission, and that God has sent Matthias to take charge. They wash each other's feet, and Elijah hands over control of his mission to Matthias. Elijah never preaches again.

Within a couple weeks, Matthias decides that the accommodation on Bowery Hill isn't good enough for him, and he moves into the more extravagant home of a man named Sylvester Mills. Matthias delivers frequent rage-filled sermons, saying that men who try to educate, empower, or uplift women are doing the devil's work, because women are evil and must be controlled. Matthias also rages against people who drink wine in bowls, tailors who hire women, clergymen, doctors, lawyers, and everybody who wears glasses. Matthias pronounces himself as the "Spirit of Truth—the male governing spirit, or God," who's arrived to set the course of history right from the Christians who got everything wrong.

Matthias preaches that all the Christians who believe that women should be motherly moral guides are actually just trying to steal women from their fathers. Matthias predicts that the world will burn to the ground, and that he will lead all the righteous men (his followers) to rebuild the earth and live in luxury. In this new world, men's wives will happily focus on cleaning homes and obeying their husbands. There will be no money trade, wages, or economic oppression, and each father will live in abundance, taking care of his own family. Matthias predicts that he'll reside in a temple on a golden throne, next to Sylvester Mills and Elijah Pierson (who'll sit on smaller thrones).

When Matthews and Elijah meet, Matthews immediately sees Elijah as emotionally weak, religiously sincere, and rich. This provides Matthews with a clear opportunity to attract a follower with ample financial resources. The book hints that Matthews wants to leverage Elijah's money and platform to regain his own patriarchal power.



Matthias and Elijah bond over their shared prophetic experiences, but the book suggests that Matthias also manipulates the grieving, vulnerable Elijah. The foot-washing ritual comes from the Gospel of John, when Jesus encouraged his disciples to wash one another's feet as a sign of humility. However, Matthias clearly sees himself as Elijah's superior, not his equal.



As before, it's not entirely clear if Matthias simply wants to exploit people like Elijah and Sylvester Mills in order to live like a wealthy, powerful man (a lifestyle to which he feels entitled), or if he is genuinely suffering from mental delusions triggered by his religious extremism. His increasingly erratic sermons—and his conviction that he alone holds the truth—suggest that he is mentally delusional.



Matthias's sermons explicitly expose how strongly patriarchal his views are—he argues that any attempts to give mothers more power in the home are inherently sinful because they reduce fatherly authority in domestic settings. There is no question here that Matthias is dead set on reclaiming a picture of the world in which men have complete authority in all aspects of domestic and social life, in a distorted caricature of his childhood community.



Matthias tells Sylvester and Elijah that he needs to stop wearing rags and that his lifestyle must reflect a prophet's. He orders extravagant silver tableware, an expensive carriage, elaborate silk and velvet clothes, and giant gold chains to wear around his neck. He walks around town and yells at people about sin. Most of the people who attend his sermons are appalled: they think that Matthias is mad. They worry about Elijah, who looks increasingly unkempt and follows Matthias around like a terrified servant. Despite this, Elijah is convinced that Sarah will now return from the dead, and he feels happy at the thought.

Matthias systematically drives away all the women in Elijah and Sylvester's circle (except for the faithful Isabella van Wagenen, who supports their cause). Matthias whips any women who try to enter the house. He says they're sinful for assuming that God talks to women. Even Mrs. Bolton, who ran Elijah's asylum, flees. Eventually, Sylvester's brother Levi Andrew Mills has Matthias arrested for fraud. The police forcibly remove Matthias and place him in an insane asylum. Soon after, Elijah successfully contests the charges, and Matthias is released. Elijah continues supporting Matthias for another year, from 1832-1833.

During that year, Elijah visits Benjamin and Ann Folger in Hudson County. Elijah looks frightening with his wild beard and long nails, yet he somehow manages to convince the Folders that they need to abandon their Christian faith and follow his new religion: this means they must stop praying and going to church, and that Ann must obey the men at all times. Elijah moves in, and soon after, Matthias arrives. Matthias claims to be an angel, so the Folders invite him to stay, as they're afraid to provoke him and anger God. A few weeks later, Isabella Van Wagenen follows and moves in as well.

Matthias calls his new home "Mount Zion." He swiftly proclaims himself the household patriarch and takes control, giving orders to everybody else. Matthias effectively revives the rural lifestyle he grew up with: the men work in the garden, and the women work in the house. He also recruits a tailor to sew him more clothes and uses Benjamin's money to buy an expensive watch, sword, and more jewelry. While fashions are evolving at the time to favor simpler, more casual clothing, Matthias dresses himself up like an extravagant military ruler from a bygone era, except he keeps his wild, long hair and beard. Indoors, he wears elaborate silk nightcaps. He convinces everyone that his attire has religious significance.

Matthias continues to indulge his desire to seem like a wealthy, powerful man by dressing more extravagantly. His attempts to seem authoritative, however, tend to backfire: most people assume that he's insane rather than respectable. Elijah's obsession with bringing Sarah back from the dead shows that his religious delusions make him susceptible to manipulation: he's effectively handed over control of his money, home, and freedom to Matthias.



Matthias clearly displays a lot of dysfunctional, hostile rage against women. His resentment and violence towards women underscore how dangerous and marginalizing male rage (at the threat of losing power in American society) can be. Elijah continues to let his delusional desire to resurrect Sarah from the dead dismantle his life—so much so that he retrieves Matthias from prison and reinstates him as the authority figure in his life, while his own physical and mental condition deteriorates.



Elijah's unkempt appearance reinforces the idea that his delusions are causing his physical condition to decline. Similarly, his devotion to Matthias (originally to Christianity) has pushed him to the point of rejecting Christianity altogether in favor of Matthias's new religion, showing how helplessly vulnerable he is. His insistence that Ann must obey men at all times stresses, once more, that Matthias's vision is centered on reclaiming male authority over women.



The name Mount Zion evokes the holy city of Jerusalem, showing that Matthias wants to portray his home as heaven on earth. Matthias is clearly consumed with the idea of reviving the traditional, rural lifestyle that he grew up with, so he establishes himself as a father-figure running his own household at Mount Zion. This gives him the kind of power and authority that seemed beyond his reach when he moved to the city. It's clear, however, that Matthias uses his power for selfish reasons (for example, purchasing luxurious clothing for himself with other people's money and making others serve him). Matthias's behavior highlights how easy it is to abuse a position of power for personal gain.



Matthias also creates many rules about the household's food. He bans pork, roast meats, pies, and desserts, but he allows plentiful boiled fish and poultry, accompanied with vegetables and fruit. Matthias claims that his rules come from God, but in truth, he favors simple country food over the trendy food favored by emerging middle-class households, which shift in the 1800s to focus on roast meats and baked goods. Matthias always sits at the head of the table and eats from silver bowls that the women serve him. The others eat and drink from simple tableware. All these rituals resemble traditions from his upbringing in Coila.

At dinner time, Matthias delivers angry sermons and punishments aimed at shaming and disciplining the family. Elijah is no longer allowed to pray and practice loving kindness towards women and children. When things go well, Matthias praises his family for obeying him. When they don't, he threatens to curse, blind, and kill them with his magical powers. One time, he even whips Isabella Van Wagenen because she falls ill. After seeing this, the others hide their illnesses and keep working. Curiously, Ann believes in Matthias's methods. She swears that all her ailments and problems disappear under Matthias's watchful eye.

After several months, things take a sour turn, and Isabella Van Wagenen witnesses the turning point. Isabella's life story begins around 1797, when she's born as a slave. She's separated from her family, sold to an older man, and forced to bear children. She takes solace in religion. Despite her subservient background, Isabella is a formidable woman. When her owner refuses to liberate her, she abandons her family and runs away to New York. That year, in 1827, New York bans slavery. Isabella later petitions to gain custody of her children and liberates them too.

When Isabella Van Wagenen moves to New York, she finds work as a servant and joins a Methodist church. She's drawn to Methodist ideas that celebrate love and equality between all people. She also starts believing that God is all around her, and she notices little signs of his presence in her day-to-day life. In 1831, Isabella meets Elijah Pierson through the African Methodist church, and she joins his household. She meets Matthias soon after, and—judging by his wild beard and strange appearance—she assumes that he's an incarnation of Jesus. She is, however, surprised that Matthias is more angry than loving. Nonetheless, when Elijah begins following Matthias's teachings, Isabella follows suit.

Matthias continues attempting to recreate the lifestyle he knew in his childhood community (in Coila). His resentment of middle-class urban culture (which destabilizes fatherly authority in the home) shines through when he bans foods that have become fashionable among upwardly mobile people. His behavior (in forcing the women to serve him, and in prohibiting others from using luxurious items like silver bowls) underscores how easy it is for men to abuse their power in the home to benefit themselves when they have total, unchecked authority.



Matthias's sermons also replicate his childhood community's practices of publicly shaming people who don't follow their rules. Elijah's tendency to want to be as perfect as possible in religious matters makes him obey Matthias, while the others obey out of fear (exposing how abusive fear-based religious compliance can be). Matthias marginalizes and oppresses children, women, and people of color (like his Black servant Isabella Van Wagenen) the most, highlighting who suffers the most in patriarchal communities. Ann's enthusiasm seems odd and out of place compared to the others' fear and drudgery. This suggests that she may have other motives for supporting Matthias.



Isabella Van Wagenen's early life story exposes how strong and resilient she is. Despite suffering the most abuses of any other character (such as enslavement and sexual violence), Isabella refuses to submit to oppression: she emancipates herself, and she even uses the law to help emancipate others. This is an awe-inspiring feat in a society that has very few legal rights for women and people of color.



Isabella's religious awakening makes her more open to becoming Matthias's follower. This suggests that religious devotion might make people vulnerable to exploitation, an idea that the authors will pick up again towards the end of the book. Isabella joins Matthias's cause because she really believes in it, suggesting that her motivations are religious. However, it's clear that she is not completely blind in her devotion: she notices Matthias's hostility, which makes her hesitate at first. The book hints that Isabella will show greater discernment and resilience in the end.



Isabella Van Wagenen moves into the Folgers' home upstate, but she starts having doubts about her situation when she notices that Ann Folger and Matthias are developing a romantic bond. Ann starts dressing more seductively, wearing perfume, and giving Matthias gifts. They take long walks and talk for hours on end. On these walks, they talk a lot about marriage. Matthias tells Ann that women shouldn't choose their partners: only his prophetic vision can decide who should be together, based on how well their spirits match. Soon enough, Matthias convinces Ann that God has decided *they* should be together, because their spirits match.

Over the next few days, Isabella Van Wagenen notices Ann and Matthias sitting by the fire in the evenings and staring deeply into each other's eyes. The family bathes every week, but usually the men bathe separately from the women. One evening, Isabella is appalled when Ann goes into the bathroom to "bathe" Matthias and winds up staying alone with him for several hours. It seems to Isabella that Ann (who used to be so humble and chaste) is acting impiously by being so seductive. It also seems strange to Isabella that Matthias (who's supposedly a godly figure) is so easily swayed by Ann's charms.

Meanwhile, Ann's husband, Benjamin Folger, is in New York City trying to salvage the remains of his swiftly declining reputation. Over the last year, Benjamin has made business decisions and trades based on Elijah's visions, and most of these decisions have been bad ones. That week, Ann and Elijah visit Benjamin in New York. They tell Benjamin that he needs to give Ann up to Matthias so that the pair can have a holy son. Benjamin is horrified, but he eventually agrees. The group return upstate, and a forlorn Benjamin watches Ann marry Matthias. Ann and Matthias retire to bed together, while Benjamin wanders around the house feeling lost and crying out Ann's name.

A few months later, Matthias sends Benjamin to Albany to fetch his children from Margaret. Margaret is surprised that Matthias is still alive, but she thinks that Benjamin is a respectable man. Margaret assumes that Matthias is finally doing right by his family, so she lets her two children (20-year-old Isabella Laisdell and 11-year-old Johnny) leave with Benjamin for a visit. Isabella Laisdell is already married, but she goes anyway. That night, Benjamin slips into Isabella Laisdell's bed and has sex with her. In the morning, Isabella Laisdell is reluctant to follow Matthias's rules, but he whips her into submission. Matthias decides that Isabella Laisdell and Benjamin should get married. Matthias conducts the marriage ceremony himself.

It now becomes clear why Ann is so enthusiastic about Matthias's rules: she is developing an attraction to him. This suggests that her motivations are romantic rather than primarily religious. Matthias also begins adding new rules to his religion when he begins to desire Ann, confirming that he, too, doesn't have purely religious motives. With her misgivings about the situation, Isabella continues to show that she is more discerning than the rest.



It's implied that rather than actually bathing Matthias, Ann is having a sexual relationship with him. Matthias and Ann's behavior continues underscoring that their desire—rather than their religious convictions—motivates them. Isabella, in contrast, notices that Matthias is changing his rules, and this makes her doubt his authority. Isabella's doubts suggest that her motivations are strictly religious: she only wants to obey Matthias if he's actually embodying godly behavior and encouraging it in others.



Elijah's delusions continue to wreak havoc around him. They destroyed his own career, and now they are starting to destroy Benjamin's career. This suggests, as before, that Elijah's religious obsession drives him to delusions that negatively affect those around him. Ann and Matthias, meanwhile, exploit their power to pursue a sexual relationship. Benjamin's despair stresses that this arrangement is not strictly consensual for everyone involved: Benjamin is coerced into agreeing to share his wife.



It's clear from Benjamin's financial and romantic struggles that he's not feeling empowered by the community at Mount Zion. However, when Matthias's daughter (Isabella Laisdell) arrives on the scene, Benjamin decides to keep participating in the community because he desires her. Benjamin's motivations, too, seem to be fueled by sexual attraction. When Matthias beats Isabella Laisdell, he again exposes how dysfunctional his power is: he abuses those under him to keep them in line.



CHAPTER 4: THE DOWNFALL

On the day that Isabella Laisdell and Benjamin are married, another member of the household—a young woman named Catherine Galloway—is miserable. Apparently, Ann and Matthias told Catherine that *she* was Benjamin's spiritual match. Since then, Catherine has been sleeping with Benjamin, assuming that they will be married. Meanwhile, Ann stops helping in the household. She sleeps late into the day and cuddles with Matthias, while Matthias scolds Isabella van Wagenen for failing to keep up with the housework. When Isabella van Wagenen complains, Matthias says that his spirit will infuse her and help her work twice as hard. She's not impressed.

A few weeks pass, and Benjamin writes to Margaret, saying that her children are fine but that they won't be returning. Isabella Laisdell's first husband (Charles Laisdell) grows worried and heads down to Hudson to investigate. Isabella van Wagenen turns him away, but he persists, returning every day until they let him in. Eventually, Elijah offers Charles money to get rid of him, and Charles agrees. Charles leaves, and he tells everyone he knows about the strange events going on at the Folgers. Then, he files legal papers to get his wife back, even though she doesn't want to leave.

Charles Laisdell takes Isabella Laisdell back to Albany against her will. She doesn't tell Margaret about her brief marriage to Benjamin. Meanwhile, in Hudson, Matthias decides that Benjamin should marry Catherine, and he weds the pair. The local villagers are angry about the situation at Mount Zion and begin harassing Matthias. They unsuccessfully try to expel Matthias from Benjamin's home. By March 1834, Ann believes that she's pregnant with a holy child. Catherine is also pregnant, but she has a miscarriage. Matthias forces Catherine to go back to work only a few days after her miscarriage.

That year, a family of four arrive from Albany and join the cult. The father (Mr. Thompson) doesn't really believe that Matthias is a prophet, but he likes the idea of a society in which men are completely in charge. The mother, Elizabeth Thompson, wonders if Ann sleeps with Benjamin when Matthias travels to New York to preach. Ann admits that she does, with Matthias's blessing. A few weeks later, Mr. Thompson decides that there's too much wife-swapping going on, and he doesn't want to lose Elizabeth to another man, so he packs up the family to leave. He flees with his children and comes back several days later for Elizabeth.

It starts to become clear that other people in the household are having sexual relationships with each other. Catherine's misery underscores that the community's sexually fluid behavior is dysfunctional because it's not fully consensual. Matthias continues exploiting Isabella Van Wagenen, showing that she bears the brunt of the household's labor. Her predicament reinforces the idea that white patriarchal communities marginalize women of color the most. Despite her oppression, Isabella Van Wagenen continues to resist, showing how resilient she is.



Charles's power to decide Isabella Laisdell's fate shows how much power men have in this society: even the law favors his wishes and provides him with tools to achieve what he wants (namely, bringing Isabella Laisdell home, regardless of Isabella's wishes). Others, like Benjamin (and even Isabella Laisdell, who wants to stay in the cult now that she's in a relationship with Benjamin) keep exposing that their sexual desire—rather than their religious commitments to Matthias's rules—are primarily influencing their actions.



Charles successfully leverages his legal power to forcibly remove Isabella from the cult, exposing once more that women have very little power in this society. Matthias's behavior reveals the same, as he forces women like Catherine to work even when they are ill. Matthias shrewdly pairs Benjamin and Catherine, knowing that they're more likely to keep following his orders if their sexual needs are met. Meanwhile, the group's infamy grows as the surrounding community notices the cult's rejection of social norms.



Mr. Thompson's behavior continues to expose that, like several other cult members, religion isn't his primary motivation. He joins the cult because he finds its patriarchal structure attractive, though he leaves out of disgust with the group's sexual permissiveness—this fluidity offends traditional patriarchal norms.



When Mr. Thompson returns, Elizabeth explains that Matthias locked her in a room while he was trying to decide if she should be matched with Benjamin or Elijah. On June 1st, 1834, a forlorn Benjamin winds up in his town church. He looks in on two colleagues who express their concern about his situation and Ann's safety. Benjamin gets drunk with his colleagues. That night, Benjamin storms back to Mount Zion to seize Ann and leave, but Ann refuses. She talks with Benjamin in private, and he gives up on his attempt, looking subdued.

The next day, Benjamin returns to the village and tells the locals that his plan failed. The angry villagers storm Mount Zion to expel Matthias. Matthias shaves his beard to avoid detection, and he flees. Ann is heartbroken. Benjamin takes Ann to bed, happy that he's finally got her back. The next day, Elijah decides that the spirit of God has now entered *his* body, and he'll take charge of the family. Ann, Benjamin, and Isabella Van Wagenen refuse to accept this, and they immediately flee to New York, leaving Elijah, Catherine, and the cult's children behind. A few days later, Elijah sheepishly follows.

By mid-July, the group returns to Mount Zion (without Benjamin, who's traveling for work). Elijah starts having seizures, and he believes that he's possessed by devils. He cries out for Ann while fumbling at his crotch, saying that she can expel the devils by sleeping with him. The others have to restrain him. On July 28, Matthias feeds the group blackberries for dessert, though he declines to eat any himself. Ann only has one or two berries. Elijah eats a full bowl. The next day, Elijah falls deathly ill. Matthias bans any doctors or medicine, saying that only prayer will help Elijah. By August 5, Elijah is dead. He dies in a pool of his own vomit and feces.

It turns out that Benjamin transferred the deeds of his home to Elijah at some point in the last year. With Elijah dead, the country treasurer arrives to seize the property for Elijah's heir: his daughter Elizabeth. Matthias initially refuses to hand over the deeds. Eventually, Elizabeth agrees to let Matthias and his followers stay at Mount Zion, so Matthias gives her the deeds. Matthias warns his followers that anyone who opposes him will meet a similar fate to Elijah's. Meanwhile, the coroner orders an autopsy on Elijah's body: it suggests that Elijah was poisoned.

Matthias's treatment of Elizabeth continues showing that he has no respect for women and suggests that much of the cult's sexual fluidity is nonconsensual. However, Ann's loyalty to Matthias shows that this isn't always the case, while her husband is left without recourse.



Benjamin continues to show that his romantic desires—rather than his religious commitments—primarily motivate his actions. It's only after Ann rejects him that he gathers the local villagers to dismantle the cult. Elijah, on the other hand, genuinely believes (albeit briefly) that he has become a divine figure. Isabella is the only character who remains relatively consistent in her beliefs, as she is critical of others' religiously justified whims.



Elijah's mental and physical condition continues to deteriorate, exposing the debilitating effects of his delusion. The fact that Matthias and Ann avoid the berries suggests that they may have poisoned them. This further implies that Matthias is so consumed with being the only man in charge that he murders Elijah for threatening Matthias's power and authority in the cult. Ann, meanwhile, seems to be so consumed with her desire for Matthias that she goes along with his plan, showing, as before, that sexual desire motivates her actions.



Matthias's behavior suggests that his actions are driven by a lust for power and material wealth rather than strictly religion. Matthias's threats also reinforce the fact that he rules the cult with fear tactics, somewhat like the shaming environment in which he grew up. Matthias, however, has raised the stakes, threatening to kill people who disobey him, not just shame them. He appears far less concerned with encouraging the community's wellbeing and more concerned with maintaining his position of authority.



Matthias and his followers retreat to New York City. Ann, who's six months pregnant, continues sleeping with both Benjamin and Matthias. She grows conflicted about which partner she loves more. Sensing Ann's growing reconnection with Benjamin, Matthias grows hostile towards her. The group argues for several days until Ann admits that she's happier with Benjamin. Benjamin jumps in and offers Matthias a large sum of money (\$630) to leave. Matthias accepts the money and leaves to go and buy a farm for his "Kingdom." As soon as Matthias leaves, Benjamin contacts the police and says that Matthias stole \$630 from him.

Meanwhile, Isabella Van Wagenen takes the cult's remaining children to Albany to leave them in Margaret's care. When Isabella arrives, she is shocked to see Matthias there. Matthias realizes that there's a warrant out for his arrest, so he gives Margaret \$50 to look after the children that Isabella dropped on Margaret's doorstep, and he flees. But before he can get out of Albany, the police arrest him. By now, Matthias is charged with defrauding Benjamin Folger and murdering Elijah Pierson.

When the police interrogate Matthias, he proclaims that he's a High Priest and that all his followers willingly gave them his money. The story becomes a tabloid sensation in the penny press, and the whole city reads about it. Meanwhile, Isabella Van Wagenen urges Margaret to help Matthias, and Margaret petitions two prominent and well-respected lawyers (Henry B. Western and N. Nye Hall) to defend Matthias in court. Surprisingly, they agree. It's likely that Margaret wants to get Matthias cleared so that she can divorce him and take half of the money he's collected from his followers.

Western and Hall obtain a statement from Isabella Van Wagenen claiming that Benjamin willingly gave Matthias his money. In retaliation, Benjamin releases a statement saying that Matthias's story is a lie. He also claims that Isabella and Matthias poisoned Elijah. Isabella swiftly accuses Benjamin of slander and begins collecting testimonies about her trustworthiness from her former employers. The trial ends up being delayed for months, because the judge gets influenza.

Ann's behavior shows that her personal desires rule her actions: she's enamored with the cult and committed to its cause when she's attracted to Matthias, but her commitment to Matthias's religion wavers when her feelings for him start to wane. Benjamin, too, seizes the opportunity to dismantle the cult purely so that he can resume his romantic relationship with Ann. Matthias's acceptance of Benjamin's money also suggests that his motives aren't strictly spiritual. The \$630 that Benjamin offers Matthias is equivalent to almost \$20,000 today.



Isabella continues showing her strength and resilience: even when the cult falls apart, she doesn't grow despondent. Instead, she takes practical action to ensure the children's safety. Margaret, as before, resumes her duty to her children when Matthias fails. Both women are doing the actual work of taking care of others, while men like Matthias act selfishly and erratically. The juxtaposition of their responsible actions against Matthias's dysfunctional behavior suggests that while women often bear the brunt of patriarchal excesses, they also tend to assume responsibility for the fallout of men's behavior.



Isabella, as before, continues revealing her resilience and practical thinking in the face of obstacles: she is clearly not a woman who gives up or becomes easily discouraged. Margaret exposes how adept she is at functioning in society by seeking lawyers and making pragmatic choices to ensure her own financial security. Both women's behavior reinforces the idea that women are far more competent in social and institutional matters than their male-privileging society assumes.



In order to protect himself and Ann, Benjamin shifts blame onto Isabella. He assumes that people will favor his story because his society is prejudiced against Black women. However, Isabella continues showing how tough and resourceful she is: she refuses to back down and immediately takes action to protect herself. Her ability to leverage institutional systems like the law to defend herself is formidable, especially given how difficult it is for women (and especially women of color) to do so in this society.



There's a press frenzy over Matthias in the months leading up to the trial. Some papers brand Matthias as a fraud and a swindler. Others say that Matthias has a mental disorder, and he's simply insane. Others still, question aspects of their society that could have triggered or permitted such events to unfold. Some blame the rapid increase in commercialism in the United States. Conservatives weigh in, blaming the individualism and egalitarianism that's taken hold of 19th-century American society. Some even say that Matthias is a conservative man who was pushed to the brink in his efforts to restore society's patriarchal order.

Democrats also weigh in, saying that religious fanaticism has taken over the country. An editor named Mordecai Manuel Noah argues that Matthias's followers all exhibited fanatical behavior before meeting him, and that made them vulnerable to manipulation. Another editor named William Leete Stone argues that the rising tide of evangelicalism (and its agenda of reform and perfectionism) allows good people to be misled by religious frauds.

Sensing an ally in Stone, Benjamin and Ann Folger publish a book with Stone outlining their side of the story. Meanwhile, Isabella Van Wagenen recruits Catherine Galloway to confirm her claim that the Folgers acted consensually in the cult. All the while, Matthias preaches from his jail cell, prophesying that a great freeze is coming and he will rule the world after the thaw. In the background, the prosecution obtains evidence that Matthias beat Isabella Laisdell, so that they can also charge him with assault.

The trial takes four days. Matthias attends, wearing a ruffled shirt and a colorful pair of extravagant pantaloons, with Western as his lawyer. Under cross-examination, Matthias delivers wild, lengthy sermons, calling everybody in the courtroom a devil. Matthias even talks over the judge. Eventually, the judge holds Matthias in contempt of court. Then, the judge opens a hearing to inquire if Matthias is mentally fit to take the stand. Eight witnesses (including four doctors) take the stand, and they're divided over the issue of Matthias's sanity. The jury decides that since half of the witnesses think that Matthias is sane, the trial should proceed.

The press frenzy over Matthias revisits the ambiguity over Matthews's sanity. Some of the press suspect that Matthias just wants to be rich and powerful and uses religion as a vehicle to get what he wants. Other members of the press think that he is deranged and really believes the ideas he peddles. The press response also suggests—as the authors hinted at the outset—that the rise of individualistic, trade-based urban culture displaces poor, white, rural men who are used to having patriarchal power in small farming-based communities. Matthias's actions thus symbolize the frustration of such people, and their dysfunctional attempts to reclaim what they feel they have lost.



The press response also suggests—as the authors have already implied—that obsessing over religious perfection hampers a person's ability to function in society and makes them vulnerable to manipulation. In criticizing the impact of religion on society, the press subtly reveals that the United States is becoming more secular (less religious).



Benjamin and Ann shrewdly adjust their public image to depict themselves as victims whose excessive religious fervor made them easy targets. Their ability to adapt and fit within evolving social perspectives helps them. Matthias, meanwhile, refuses to change at all, and he only makes his situation worse. Isabella continues demonstrating her resourcefulness by gathering useful evidence to defend herself in court: she is clearly adept at functioning in this society, even though it undervalues Black women.



Matthias continues exposing his inability to change or modify his behavior, which works against him. The judge ruling that Matthias is sane suggests that he did intend, at least to some degree, to use his religion as an excuse to gain power and wealth. Nonetheless, the debate over Matthias's sanity—and the fact that the witnesses are evenly divided on the question—shows that it's really not clear to the public if Matthias is accountable for his behavior or what role his religious fervor played in his mental state.



The trial resumes, and Western argues that there's insufficient evidence to convict Matthias of murder: the autopsy report can't confirm that Elijah *definitely* died from poison. He might actually have died of food-related illness. Nonetheless, when Ann Folger takes the stand, she stresses that Matthias fed Elijah blackberries that he didn't eat himself and then denied Elijah medical help when he fell ill. The women—including her—had to obey Matthias, so they had no freedom to help Elijah. Catherine Galloway verifies Ann's story. Ultimately, the judge decides that there isn't enough evidence for a murder conviction. At best, Matthias could be charged with manslaughter, but that would demand a new trial. So, the jury rules that Matthias is not guilty of murder.

Then, the prosecution calls for Matthias to be charged with assaulting Isabella Laisdell. Isabella testifies that she went to Mount Zion willingly, and that her father (Matthias) was legally permitted to hit her as punishment for misbehavior. Her husband, Charles Laisdell, believes that Isabella was coerced, and the whipping was too severe to count as fatherly punishment. In the end, the jury rules that Matthias is guilty of assault. Since Isabella was technically married to Charles at the time, Matthias no longer had a legal right to discipline her. In the end, Matthias is sentenced to four months in prison.

EPILOGUE

There is a media frenzy after the trial: popular opinion holds that Matthias got off too easy, especially given that he prevented Elijah Pierson from getting medical help when Elijah was deathly ill. Many newspaper articles sensationalize the risk of people being corrupted by new cults. Mordecai Manuel Noah publishes a damning article calling for Americans to reflect on a society that allows such radical religious cults to exist at all. William Leete Stone's book also warns about the dangers of religious extremism. Margaret, however, releases a pamphlet arguing that Matthias's religious childhood was not to blame for his turn to extremism.

Meanwhile, Isabella Van Wagenen is angry that Stone's book depicts her as an evil villainess who single-handedly helped Matthias corrupt Ann and Benjamin Folger and murder Elijah. So, she seeks out an editor named Gilbert Vale to publish the truth. Vale is an anti-racist radical British immigrant, labor rights activist, and prominent public figure who opposes the strong influence of religion in American culture. So, it's odd that he would side with Isabella Van Wagenen, considering her support of Matthias's cult. Vale, however, dislikes the overall narrative of the trial: depicted as one in which "good" Christian people like the Folgers were corrupted by the "blasphemous" Matthias and his Black servant, Isabella Van Wagenen.

Matthias's lawyers manage to help him escape a murder conviction on a technicality. Ann's testimony, however, reinforces the idea that Matthias probably did intend to kill Elijah, and he's gotten away with it. Ann turns on Matthias because she no longer desires him, reinforcing the idea that her romantic urges (rather than her religious beliefs) drive her actions. Ann continues depicting herself as an innocent victim whose religious fervor made her vulnerable to exploitation, even though she actually refrained from eating too many berries herself, suggesting that she knew about Matthias's plan and went along with it. Ann shows that she's able to adapt and present herself in a way that her society will be sympathetic to, and this serves her advantage.



Isabella's testimony (in support of Matthias) carries little weight in court. The court takes her husband Charles's testimony (against Matthias) far more seriously. This, and the fact that husbands and fathers are legally permitted to discipline their daughters and wives, shows that American society is still very patriarchal, especially in institutionalized contexts like law courts.



The press attention to the trial reveals that emerging social values are shifting to become more critical of religion's influence on American society. Journalists worry that people who are raised in strict religious communities (as well as people who obsess over religious perfectionism) become consumed by the effort, which makes them vulnerable to dangerous phenomena like cults.



Ann and Benjamin attempt to discredit Isabella Van Wagenen because they know she's an easy target as a marginalized Black woman. This exposes the racism in American society. Isabella continues showing her resilience, shrewd ability to gather allies, and commitment to justice, despite the oppression she faces. Isabella's actions—in fighting back, smartly—show that Black women are far more resourceful and intelligent than their society tends to give them credit for.



Vale knows that Isabella Van Wagenen, as a Black woman, will have a hard time convincing the public of her version of events against Ann and Benjamin Folger, who are white. So, Vale pores over the historical details, looking for “white evidence” to support Isabella Van Wagenen’s story. He successfully unearths many details about Matthias’s cult that were suppressed in the Folgers’ version of the story—especially the sexual relationships between the cult members, which the Folgers successfully covered up during the trial. However, by the time Vale releases his book, public interest has moved on to several new murder scandals.

Although public interest in the scandal wanes, future writers like Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville draw inspiration from it, along with other urban crime stories involving immorality, delusional people, and imposters. They largely focus on the evils of American society, beneath the cultural veneer of “ingenuity and innocence.” Herman Melville’s book *Moby Dick* even contains a chapter about a prophet named “Elijah.” Melville also publishes another book, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, which features a mysterious stranger posing as Christ (and sometimes the Devil) who dresses in elaborate, colorful clothes. This might be an implicit reference to Matthias.

Matthias’s **cult** also influences American society. Although Matthias’s anti-Finneyite agenda collapses (with only Isabella Van Wagenen remaining true to its cause until the end), other anti-Finneyite religions—like the Mormon faith—thrive. Since the 1830s, many men resembling Matthias have formed small cults, many ushering in different norms about sexual behavior. Some Americans view these as dangerous. Others think that such cults question pre-existing social norms, and this might be a good thing. One thing that’s certain is that Matthias’s cult is not an isolated case: many people like Matthias have continuously been part of the United States’ history. Such people—who still exist in American society today—feel rage at the disintegration of “holy patriarchy.”

Vale’s worry about the public accepting Isabella’s story further exposes the racism in American society: the public, it seems, is far more willing to accept the testimony of a white person than that of a Black person. The fact that Vale has to find evidence from white people to corroborate Isabella’s story further underscores society’s tendency to unfairly discredit, blame, and villainize people of color. Vale also reveals that many cult members concealed their sexual antics when the scandal over the cult broke out. This shows that even people who consented to it (like Ann) worry about being judged—and persecuted—for their non-traditional sexual behavior. This suggests that sexual freedom is not yet broadly acceptable in American society.



Writers who reference the scandal leverage it to undermine American society’s depiction of itself as progressive and wholesome. Like the authors, such writers address dysfunctional religious behavior (and how it relates to mental suffering), male rage, and tensions between emerging urban society and more traditional rural farming communities. They see Matthias’s cult as a situation that exposes limiting and problematic undercurrents in American society.



Though Matthias’s cult might seem like just a quirky historical anomaly, cults are actually relatively common in American society. The authors suggest that marginal movements thrive when individualistic urban cultures—which tend to be more progressive—collide with (and appear to threaten) traditional ways of life. Matthias’s cult thus symbolizes a trend: namely, it captures the anger and resentment among those, often men, who feel left behind by an evolving society, and their dysfunctional attempts to regain privilege and authority. Some people suggest that cults like Matthias’s have some societal benefit, because they expose hidden problems (like the anger of the disenfranchised, or problematic sexual behaviors). In any case, the book argues that such cultural clashes continue today.



As for the people involved in Matthias's cult, Sylvester Mills winds up in an insane asylum, and then resumes his life as a merchant, avoiding religion from that point on. Catherine Galloway and several others in the cult disappear from historical record. Nobody knows what happens to them. Isabella Laisdell resumes her married life with Charles Laisdell. Margaret Matthews stays in New York and regularly visits Matthias in prison. She writes a book about Matthias and plans to get a divorce, but it's not clear if she succeeds. Ann and Benjamin Folger reintegrate with their Christian community relatively easily. Benjamin starts making successful business deals again.

Nobody knows what happens to the daughter whom Ann conceives during her time in the cult. A minister named Reverend William Creighton buys Benjamin's estate, which becomes a celebrity gathering spot. Isadora Duncan and Sandra Bernhard perform there for future president Henry Ford. Orville and Wilbur Wright use the lawn to fly their airplane.

Matthias serves four months in prison. When he's released, he and Isabella Van Wagenen show up on Margaret's doorstep. Margaret kicks them out, saying that she's run out of patience. Matthias never sees Margaret again. Three months later, Matthias shows up at the Mormon settlement in Kirtland and meets Joseph Smith. After Joseph Smith expels Matthias from Kirtland, Matthias is spotted occasionally over the next few years, preaching to various communities. Historical records suggest that Matthias dies in 1841.

Isabella Van Wagenen resumes working as a servant for her former employer. She successfully sues Benjamin Folger for slander. Isabella truly believed in Matthias's religion, but his sexual relationship with Ann Folger shook her faith. Isabella takes the money she earns from her lawsuit against Benjamin Folger and leaves New York, in search of truth. Eventually, she joins the anti-slavery movement. She changes her name and becomes the famous activist Sojourner Truth.

Even though many cult members suffer as a result of their involvement in the cult, at least some of them manage to resume functional lives. Such people, namely the Folgers, Isabella Laisdell, and Sylvester Mills are all able to adjust their behavior and values so that they can reintegrate into society. This suggests that being able to adapt, accept, and comply with evolving social values serves a person far better than stubbornly refusing to change.



The estate where the cult lived ends up becoming a playground for wealthy urban socialites. The future of the estate shows that many rural communities eventually become absorbed by the urban way of life (which celebrates entertainment and pleasure and technical innovation more than religious and other traditional, communal values).



While some cult members (especially Benjamin and Ann Folger) are able to adjust their values and reintegrate into society, Matthias stubbornly refuses to change. It seems that he never gives up trying to create an environment where he is in charge as a traditional patriarch. It seems, however, that he is never successful. The juxtaposition of Matthias fading from society against other cult members who successfully reintegrate suggests that Matthias's stubborn refusal to modernize his outlook ends up failing him. On the other hand, the simultaneous rise of the Mormon Church would seem to complicate this argument, as Mormonism becomes an enduring presence despite resisting aspects of modernizing American society.



Of all the cult members, Isabella Van Wagenen ends up emerging the most triumphant. Despite the odds being stacked against her as a Black woman in American society, she remains undaunted. She successfully uses the legal system to clear her name and earn a fortune (something that no other woman in the story could do), and she begins a new life as one of American history's most famous activists: Sojourner Truth. The fact that Isabella Van Wagenen ends up being the most successful character in the story suggests that American society unfairly undervalues Black women, and that these women's stories deserve to be preserved and championed today.





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