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

The book “The Kingdom of Matthias: A story of sex and salvation in 19th – century America” written by Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz gives an account of Robert Mathews. This book is a sensational story of a man who would later refer to himself “Matthias”. The book brought to life spiritual and sexual tensions of 19th century America. When we go down the aisle of American history, we witness religion as a deeply rooted phenomenon in American society. The reader would find certain memoirs and stories in the book written by different writers such as Gilbert Vale, William Stones, and Margaret Mathews. In this book, the life of Robert Mathews was constructed by Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz. The construction of Robert Mathews’ history and life owes the stories and memoirs of the three writers named above.

The story of a religious person named Elijah Pierson opens the book. Elijah Pierson considered himself the odd one out in New York City. For he was a religious person and perceived that the licentious lifestyle followed by the people of New York City was immoral. In that time i.e. the mid of 19th-century prostitution coupled with many other immoralities was proliferating. Elijah, being a religious person started preaching people, or precisely preaching only those who would listen to him.

The focal person in this narrative history is not Elijah but Robert Matthias who was enthusiastic and would try to preach his co-workers about God. People normally ridiculed him and that frustrated him. Out of frustration, he would beat his wife Margaret. Margret; a woman whose memoirs and stories have been used by the authors to narrate Mathews' life. He became delusional owing to his ideas about God and proclaimed himself as the “prophet of the God of the Jews”. Robert Mathews; a self-proclaimed prophet, was abusive to his wife and he labelled women as evil. For he considered women the source of temptation and distraction.

The book is fascinating and accounts for the New Evangelical developments, the "Second Awakening," the time when delusions, fundamentalism, and fanaticism instigated latch onto America. The mainstream Christianity was challenged owing to Pentecostalism and Adventism; the two cults brought about by fundamentalism, fanaticism, and delusion. These new sects were also responsible for the inception of strange beliefs regarding God (Moyers). The reading of this narrative tale raises a question in the minds that why, even today, sects exist in America today when their development is so bizarre.

The story continues in a very interesting manner owing to the narrative style of the story. The story is easy to read and the main theme of the story is easy to grasp. The book pictures a religion that has all been forgotten and limited only to the history books. As far as the focus of the story is concerned then it’s very secluded in its focus. However, it exemplifies the varied nature of American society and religion in the 19th century.

The book has been written in a storybook way so, sometimes it is hard to comprehend whether the events in the book are real or not. The story has uniformity, however, when authors write about how the kingdom of Mathews fell down, the story breaks down. One thing is worth mentioning here, the book is a nice representation, rather the introduction of what we call as second awakening in 19th century America (Moyers). Furthermore, a bloated picture of the role of religion and gender is provided by this narrative history. The primary sources for the book are legal records regarding Mathews, journalistic stories, and personal testimonies.

It can also be argued that the kingdom created by Mathews is an attempt to escape the social immoralities of the city at that time. However, the kingdom of Mathews can probably be held responsible for breeding the most dangerous social evil. Such a social evil is termed as polygamy. The most notable sexual escapade presented in the book between Matthews and Folger seems to spoil the entire Matthias movement. This notable sexual escapade also compels the readers to question about the zealots of the movement and intentions of Matthias. The book is not only about the madman proclaiming himself as a prophet and it would be a mistake if that is garnered from the text of the book (Moyers). The book described the broader religious currents, and the impacts they had on the rest of the U.S history.

The authors, through this fascinating tale, asserts that how sexual, racial, and economic condition give rise to apocalyptic sects. The use of shaky resources raises many questions about the book and put a lot of events into question. The sources are not only shaky but also biased as admitted by the authors. Albeit, authors asserted that contradicting and biased sources and events were analyzed critically for the derivation of truth, however, the difference between fact and exaggeration could not be comprehended. At last, this book is a narrative history that strengthens the view of many regarding men i.e. the folly of men. The book is worth reading for the people who have an interest in US history and are curious about the evolution of the religious sects in American society. If someone asks to suggest another name for this book, then that might be “fascinating tale of a false prophet”.

# Works Cited

Moyers, James C. *Book Review - The Kingdom of Matthias Without Sin*. 1995. 2019. <https://www.icsahome.com/book-reviews/book-review-the-kingdom-of-matthias-without-sin-csj-12-1-1995>.