

THE NEW JERUSALEM OF THE EARLY AMERICAN FRONTIER

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In late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century America several religious visionaries dreamed of establishing what they called a "New Jerusalem" in the lands newly conquered from the native peoples. During the period from 1750 to 1840 the conquering Americans opened to their occupation great and unprecedented tracts of fertile lands. The "new" lands allured the imagination of religious visionaries seeking an "empty" domain to fill with their hopes and fantasies. These visionaries hoped to escape the corruption of established communities by projecting a new set of social and moral laws onto a tract of wilderness land in advance of settlement. They hoped that such a settlement would develop free of the sins and injustices that afflicted all of the old places throughout the world. In the "New Jerusalem" the inhabitants would live in unprecedented harmony with one another and with God's purpose (as discerned through dreams, visions, and reading the Christian scriptures).

This essay will briefly examine five efforts to establish a "New Jerusalem" in frontier or rural America in the period between 1750 and 1840: by John Christopher Hartwick in central New York; by Hermon Husband in southwestern Pennsylvania; by Jemima Wilkinson in western New York; by Robert Matthews, alias the Prophet Matthias, also in western New York; and, by the New Israelites of Middletown, Vermont. Partial, rather than exhaustive, this list of five dreamers and their dreams illustrates a widespread longing for greater security in the rapidly changing society of late colonial and early republican America. Most of these New Jerusalems reveal a powerful desire for immediate access to a material wealth that was more tangible and secure than the volatile, paper instruments of a modern, market economy; most of these visionaries shared a compelling fascination with golden treasures and precious ores buried in the earth and guarded by evil spirits. By scrutinizing the Bible and their dreams, they sought the key to unlock the vast treasures needed to build a proper New Jerusalem sheathed and paved with gold and silver. And all five express the pervasive hunger for the direct intervention of divine power and instruction in the daily lives of ordinary Americans at a time of an increasing religious pluralism that confronted them with a confusing array of choices.¹

I. JOHN CHRISTOPHER HARTWICK

In 1754 an eccentric and itinerant Lutheran clergyman, John Christopher Hartwick, acquired 21,500 acres on the upper Susquehanna River in central New York. At the end of his life, in his extraordinary last will and testament, Hartwick

1. For the longings see Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830," *American Quarterly*, XXVIII (Spring 1986), pp. 6-34; Gordon S. Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History*, LXI (1980), pp. 363-70.

explained his vision of a New Jerusalem. He bestowed his tract of land upon "my Heirs, Jesus Christ, the son of God and man." Hartwick instructed his executors to establish "a regular Town, close built & to be called New Jerusalem" centered around a gymnasium and seminary to instruct "the Ignorant, ungospelized part of Mankind of whatsoever State, Colour or Complexion who shall make application to my executors and administrators and bind themselves to the Ruler.. in order to be instructed in the Christian Religion." The students were to become missionaries among the "red or Black Heathens" who were "yet in a State of Barbarity & Thorns to our eyes & Pricks in our Sides".²

Born in 1714 in central Germany, Hartwick had been educated for the Lutheran ministry at Halle, a leading pietistical seminary. In 1746 Hartwick came to America to serve as a missionary among the Germans settled around Rhinebeck in the Hudson valley. Hartwick quickly concluded that he had left civilization behind and moved to the wild margins where unwary Christians were degenerating into the barbarism of their savage neighbors. Writing home to his superiors in Germany, Hartwick reported, "There are many opportunities here for temptation and willingness to sin. There is great ignorance; and freethinking and indifference to religion contribute also. To sum it up, the situation is desperate".³

Violently ousted from his parish by angry parishioners in 1750, Hartwick roamed from parish to parish up and down the Atlantic seaboard from Virginia to Maine for the rest of his long life. Again and again, his friend and patron, Henry M. Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania recorded in his diary that a congregation had complained that Hartwick "was too hot-tempered and strict, and said that they did not want him as their preacher any longer." For long interludes Hartwick lived off the charity of his friends, especially Reverend Muhlenberg. Hartwick was a difficult guest, in part because he rarely bathed or changed his clothes. Hating women, he never married and preferred to exclude them from his religious services.⁴

Hartwick blamed his travails on the dispersed pattern of settlement that prevailed in America. He had grown up in Europe – a relatively crowded society where resources were scarce, social mobility was uncommon, and the people lived in compact villages where the poor and uneducated were under the supervision of their ministers and magistrates. But in America the relative abundance of land to

2. John Christopher Hartwick, Last Will and Testament, Hartwick Estate Papers, Lutheran Archive Center, Mt. Airy, Penn.; Karl J.R. Arndt, "John Christopher Hartwick: German Pioneer of Central New York," *New York History*, XVIII (July 1937), 301; Henry N. Pohlman, ed., *Memorial Volume of the Semi-Centennial Anniversary of Hartwick Seminary, Held August 21, 1866* (Albany, 1867), 27-9, 156-64; Peter W. Yates to Hartwick, Sep. 8, 1795, and Frederick A.C. Muhlenberg to Hartwick, Jan. 29, 1794, and Sep. 19, 1796, John Christopher Hartwick Papers, Hartwick College.

3. Hartwick to Friedrich Wagner, Feb. 19, 1754 ("desperate"), Jan. 31, 1755,, in Simon Hart and Harry J. Kreider, eds., *Lutheran Church in New York and New Jersey, 1722-1760: Lutheran Records in the Ministerial Archives of the Staatsarchiv, Hamburg, Germany*, New York, 1962, 371, 384-85; Hartwick to Rev. Master Pieters, June 26, 1754, Misc. Ms. H, New York Historical Society; John P. Dern, ed., *The Albany Protocol: Wilhelm Christoph Berkenbeyer's Chronicle of Lutheran Affairs in New York Colony, 1731-1750*, Ann Arbor, 1971, p. 510n1; Harry J. Kreider, *Lutheranism in Colonial New York*, New York, 1942, p. 109; Charles H. Glatfelter, *Pastors and People: German Lutheran and Reformed Churches in the Pennsylvania Field, 1717-1793*, 2 vols., Breinigsville, Penn., 1980, I, pp. 217-8.

4. Muhlenberg, *Journals*, I, 267-8, 403, III, 177; Pohlman, *Memorial Volume of . . . Hartwick Seminary*, 20-23; Glatfelter, *Pastors and People*, I, 52. Shortly before his death, a rumor held that Hartwick had married, but his will mentions no wife. See Frederick A.C. Muhlenberg to Hartwick, June 5, 1796, John Christopher Hartwick Papers, Hartwick College.

population permitted most common white men to obtain farms and to live scattered and often beyond the oversight of leading men. Hartwick openly longed for the more hierarchical and authoritarian society of Germany.

In Europe our churches are intertwined with the state and are supported by the state. Here in America this is not the case. Here the church is like a vineyard without a hedge, like a city without walls, like a house without door and lock.⁵

Hartwick proposed to reform American society by reordering the process of settlement. By mandating settlement in compact villages under the strict oversight of a minister-overlord, Hartwick hoped to discipline the further development of American society. He explained to imperial officials that his community would be a compact, militarized, and tightly regulated village similar to those "by which the German emperors have preserved their Extensive territories against the Incursions of the Barbarians, in former Times." Certain that the American-born were insufficiently deferential, Hartwick proposed to people his tract with settlers imported directly from Germany. To curry imperial favor, Hartwick proposed detaching his militarized village from the colony of New York to place it directly under the authority of the British monarch.⁶

Hartwick obtained the lands for his scheme by sojourning as a preacher among the Mohawk Indians at Canajohary on the Mohawk River. In 1754, with the help of his friend, Sir William Johnson, the crown's superintendent for Indian affairs in the northern colonies, Hartwick purchased his 21,500-acre tract from the Mohawk and borrowed money to pay the necessary fees to New York's royal governor and his lieutenants, receiving an official patent to the land. Running short on funds, Hartwick neglected his tract and his creditors during the 1760s and 1770s. In 1769 the Mohawks ran out of patience and went to court to compel Hartwick to pay his £ 100 debt, but the peripatetic minister could not be found. He probably never paid them for the land.⁷

After the American Revolutionary War ended in 1783 settlers flocked to central New York but they avoided Hartwick's land, largely because he refused to sell and demanded that prospective settlers accept his highly restrictive leases. His leases forbade the tenants to erect mills or to sell the timber and ordered them to lay out apple orchards. In the leases, Hartwick also reserved "full power to search for, dig and turn up the ground," either to build his own mills or to establish mines. Hartwick retained

5. Hartwick to Dr. Friedrich Wagner, Feb. 19, 1754 and Jan. 31, 1755, in Hart and Kreider, eds., *Lutheran Church in New York and New Jersey*, pp. 371, 384.

6. Hartwick to Rev. Master Peters, June 26, 1754, Misc. Ms. H, New York Historical Society; "Proposed Address to the King in Favor of the Reverend Mr. Hartwick," [Jan. 1756], in Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan, ed., *The Documentary History of the State of New York*, 4 vols., Albany, 1849-51, IV, pp. 298-300.

7. John W. Jordan, "Rev. John Martin Mack's Narrative of a Visit to Onondaga in 1752," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XXIX (1905), pp. 344-5; Mohawk Sachems to Hartwick, undated, Simon Gratz Coll., Case 4, Box 5, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; Hartwick to Sir William Johnson, Jan. 18, 1756, and "Proposed Address to the King in Favor of the Revd. Mr. Hartwick," [Jan. 1756], in O'Callaghan, ed., *Documentary History of the State of New York*, IV, 294, pp. 298-300; Johnson to Cadwallader Colden, Mar. 19, 1761, in Milton W. Hamilton and James Sullivan, eds., *The Papers of Sir William Johnson*, 14 vols. Albany, 1921-57, III, p. 365; Hartwick to Reverend Master Pieters, June 26, 1754, Misc. Ms. H, New York Historical Society; Pohlman, *Memorial Volume of... Hartwick Seminary*, 14-18; Sir William Johnson, "Journal of Indian Affairs," Feb. 9, April 6, 1767, and John Tabor Kempe to Johnson, Mar. 11, 1769, in Hamilton and Sullivan, eds., *Paper of Sir William Johnson*, XII, pp. 269, 303, 702-3.

full liberty of ingress, egress and regress through the said premises with his or their cattle, carriages and servants, and to carry off or to manufacture the ore within the above granted premises.⁸

Apparently, Hartwick sought gold to pave the streets of his New Jerusalem. Given that he had no capital to mine the ores – which fortuitously did not exist – these reservations deterred settlers to no good end.

More than orchards and mining rights, Hartwick wanted control over the souls and morals of his tenants. He meant his lands as bait to secure the captive, deferential congregation that had eluded him during his long years of restless travel through the American colonies. His leases demanded that the tenant acknowledge Hartwick “for his Pastor, Teacher, and Spiritual Counsellor” and

to attend regularly, decently, attentively, and devoutly Divine Service and instruction performed and given, by the said John Christopher Hartwick, or his substitute.

None of this appealed to the predominantly Yankee settlers of central New York. Baptists, Congregationalists, or freethinkers, they did not mean to accept a dictatorial German Lutheran as their spiritual overlord. Committing their souls to Hartwick was even more alarming than subjecting their farms to his prospective mining operations.⁹

Meanwhile, a nearby land speculator named William Cooper lusted after Hartwick’s increasingly valuable but largely neglected domain. During the late 1780s, Cooper acquired the lands beside Lake Otsego immediately north of Hartwick’s Patent. Attracting hundreds of settlers by selling them lands at a cheap rate and without any restrictive covenants, Cooper developed at the foot of the Lake a thriving but profane settlement that he named Cooperstown. With a mixture of threats and promises, in 1794 Cooper obtained legal authority from Hartwick to rent his lands to settlers. Then Cooper promptly secured ownership of the lands by selling them to a few friends who quickly resold them to Cooper. Cooper proceeded to retail the lands to dozens of settlers; from their payments Cooper would pay Hartwick for the lands.¹⁰

Convinced that Hartwick was a hopeless incompetent, Cooper believed that he had done everyone a good turn by taking control of the patent and transferring possession so rapidly to settlers. At last the Hartwick Patent would develop to the benefit of Cooperstown and the surrounding county. At last, settlers could obtain freehold title to farms in the Hartwick Patent. At last, Cooper could reap a profit by

8. Willard Vincent Huntington, “Old Time Notes Relating to Otsego County and the Upper Susquehanna Valley,” (Typescript, New York State Historical Association), 618; William Ellison to Goldsborough Banyar, Oct. 1787, William Cooper Papers, Hartwick College; Hartwick, undated lease, c. 1787, John Christopher Hartwick Papers, Hartwick College. For the New Jerusalem see Hartwick’s last will and testament, Hartwick Estate Papers, Lutheran Archive Center, Mount Airy, Pennsylvania; and Karl J.R. Arndt, “John Christopher Hartwick: German Pioneer of Central New York,” *New York History*, XVIII (July 1937), p. 301.

9. Hartwick, undated lease, c. 1787, John Christopher Hartwick Papers, Hartwick College; Hartwick’s last will and testament, Hartwick Estate Papers, Lutheran Archive Center, Mount Airy, Pennsylvania.

10. Hartwick, undated statement, H Box, New York State Historical Association; Cooper, Memorandum, Dec. 29, 1791, John Christopher Hartwick Papers, Hartwick College; Cooper to Hartwick, Sep. 15, 1794, William Cooper Papers, Hartwick College.

reselling the lands at a higher price per acre than he paid to Hartwick. And, at last, John Christopher Hartwick had a large and steady annual income. Cooper's maneuver promised Hartwick twenty-four shillings per acre in interest and principle paid in cash within ten years – a fair price for that time and locale. Surely, Cooper reasoned, Hartwick was far better off with money than with the land that had laid idle and unproductive in his hands for thirty years. As Cooper saw it, he had rescued Hartwick from his own ineptitude, providing the wealth that had so long eluded him.¹¹

But Hartwick had not sought personal wealth and he refused to touch the revenue that Cooper collected and deposited in an Albany bank on his account. Hartwick had devoted his life to pursuit of an elusive New Jerusalem: a compact community that would sustain a harmonious and deferential congregation committed to his stewardship. He longed to create a community that would be an inversion of the disorderly parish that had so violently humiliated him in 1750. Hartwick's dream collapsed when that philistine William Cooper converted his precious land into so much mammon. As Hartwick saw it, Cooper arranged the Hartwick Patent into a typical American landscape of dispersed farms where common folk could lead unsupervised lives of disorder and immorality - just the sort of place that had abused him in 1750. Cooper's coup ensured that Hartwick's tract would develop as a rural satellite of the commercial village of Cooperstown, rather than as a New Jerusalem isolated from a materialistic world. Hartwick died in 1796 while roaming the country in continued, futile search for his New Jerusalem.¹²

II. HERMON HUSBAND

Inspired by the evangelical Protestantism of the Great Awakening of the 1740s, Hermon Husband dedicated his life to bringing American society to a Christian and egalitarian perfection. In sharp contrast to Hartwick, Hermon Husband believed that American society was corrupted by inequality. According to Husband, the secular elite of wealthy planters, lawyers, merchants, and officials were too powerful. They simulatenously extorted property from the laboring people and blinded them to the spiritual truth that would set them free. Instead of strengthening elite control, as Hartwick proposed, Husband meant to liberate the common people by decentralizing power and by sacralizing material life. Refusing to disentangle the material and spiritual worlds, Husband insisted that there could be no true godliness without equal rights and property. Conversely, there could be no reformation of this world without an infusion of the divine spirit in human hearts and minds. He enthusiastically supported the American Revolution because, he explained,

I was Early Convinced that the Authors who Wrote in favour of Liberty Was Generally Inspired by the Same Spirit that we Relegeous Professors Called Christ.

11. Cooper to Hartwick, Sep. 15, 1794, William Cooper Papers, Hartwick College.

12. Van Rensselaer's receipt to Cooper, Aug. 14, 1794, John Christopher Hartwick Papers, Hartwick College; Hartwick, undated statement, H Box, Misc. Coll., New York State Historical Association; Hartwick, last will and testament, Hartwick Estate Papers, Lutheran Archive Center, Mount Airy, Pennsylvania; Arndt, "John Christopher Hartwick," p. 301.

In North Carolina during the 1760s and early 1770s he inspired and helped lead the Regulation, the armed resistance by small farmers against the exploitation practiced by corrupt merchants, lawyers, and colonial officials.¹³

Hounded from North Carolina in 1771 by the militarily victorious elite, Husband took refuge in southwestern Pennsylvania where he developed his millenarian ideas in a series of pamphlets and almanac pieces published during the 1780s. Husband meant to redistribute land and to transfer power from the wealthy and their lawyers to a popularly elected council of religious elders. He promised that in the New Jerusalem

the labouring, industrious people, the militia of freemen, shall prevail over the standing armies of kings and tyrants, that only rob them, and live upon their labour, in idleness and luxury.

Working from the Biblical prophecies of Ezekiel, Husband modified a map of North America to design the geographic bounds of his New Jerusalem. Beginning in southwestern Pennsylvania, Husband planned to extend his utopian society over most of North America west of the Allegheny mountains. The Federal Constitution of 1787 and the consequent Federalist administration of George Washington disgusted Husband as simultaneously godless and elitist, a betrayal of America's potential as the New Jerusalem. Consequently, he helped lead the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794, an agrarian resistance movement to the new excise taxes imposed by the Washington administration. The Federalists used armed force to suppress the resistance, arresting Husband, who died shortly thereafter, before he could establish his New Jerusalem.¹⁴

III. JEMIMA WILKINSON

In western New York, the charismatic Jemima Wilkinson was more successful in achieving her New Jerusalem. Beginning as a lay preacher among Rhode Island's Quakers, Wilkinson concluded that she was a divine messenger, "The Public Universal Friend." In 1789 she led her followers west to settle near Seneca Lake in Yates County, New York. At its peak in the early 1790s about sixty families belonged to her community located on a 23,000-acre township named Jerusalem. At the center of her community was her family, a household of about sixteen people, of both genders and diverse ages but principally young women who shared her commitment to celibacy. Her community prospered until her death in 1819. Thereafter, lawsuits consumed her property and divided her followers.¹⁵

13. Mark H. Jones, "Hermon Husband: Millenarian, Carolina Regulator, and Whiskey Rebel," (Ph.d. diss., Northern Illinois University, 1982); Dorothy Fennell, "Hermon Husband's New Jerusalem: Frontier Radicalism and the Millenialist Tradition," in Elise Marienstras and Barbara Karsky, eds., *Autre Temps, Autre Espace: Etudes Sur L'Amerique Pre-Industrielle*, Nancy, France, 1986, pp. 67-75; Ruth H. Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800*, New York, 1985, pp. 72-74 (Husband quoted, p. 73); Marco Sioli, *Contro I Padri Fondatori: Petizioni e insurrezioni nell'America post-rivoluzionaria*, Milano, 1994, p. 93-102.

14. Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 113-14, pp. 182-84 (Husband quoted p. 183); Fennell, "Hermon Husband's New Jerusalem," pp. 69-75.

15. Stephen Marini, *Radical Sects of Revolutionary New England*, Cambridge, Mass., 1982, pp. 48-50; Whitney R. Cross, *The BurnedOver District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1950, pp. 34-35; Herbert A. Wisbey, Jr., *Pioneer Prophetess: Jemima Wilkinson, the Publick Universal Friend*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1964.

As a prophet, Wilkinson found a role that permitted her to transcend the powerful gendered constraints of her culture. James Emlen, a visiting Quaker, reported: "for her part, she thought it her duty not to be a Man pleaser, therefore was she persecuted." By eschewing marriage, preaching in public, exercising familial and community power over men as well as women, and by defying the prescribed attire for women, Wilkinson profoundly troubled male ministers and magistrates. Emlen insisted,

her deportment, dress, features, &c are so very masculine that I think no one would suppose her to be a Woman, who had not some previous knowledge of her.

In fact, her attire purposefully mixed "male" and "female" clothing in an attempt to confuse and transcend a gendered, human identity. The French traveler La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt described:

Jemima stood at the door of her bed-chamber on a carpet, with an arm-chair behind her. She had on a white morning gown, and waistcoat, such as men wear, and a petticoat of the same colour. Her black hair was cut short, carefully combed, and divided behind into three ringlets; she wore a stock, and a white silk cravat, which was tied about her neck with affected negligence. In point of delivery, she preached with more ease, than any other Quaker, I have yet heard; but the subject matter of her discourse was an eternal repetition of the same topics, death, sin, and repentance. She is said to be about forty years of age, but she did not appear to be more than thirty. She is of middle stature, well made, of a florid countenance and has fine teeth, and beautiful eyes.

In 1798 James Kent reached the most balanced conclusion:

She is a large, likely, sprightly woman & sociable, of perhaps 40 years of age. She wears her black hair turned back without a cap & shakes Hands & wears a loose morning gown & appears to assert a neutrality of Sex & has a snug & very neat little rural Hut.¹⁶

IV. ROBERT MATTHEWS

The disgruntled carpenter Robert Matthews designed a patriarchal New Jerusalem that inverted Jemima Wilkinson's rejection of gendered power. Wilkinson represented in extreme the new tendency by spiritually ambitious women to speak out publicly, a trend that infuriated Matthews, who meant to silence women in public and complete their confinement within the household. As an itinerant carpenter

16. Wisbey, *Pioneer Prophetess*, pp. 119-54; John Lincklaen, *Travels in the Years 1791 and 1792 in Pennsylvania, New York, and Vermont: Journals of John Lincklaen, Agent of the Holland Land Company*, ed., Helen L. Fairchild, New York, 1897, p. 62; William Fenton, ed., "The Journal of James Emlen, Kept on a Trip to Canandaigua, New York, September 15, to October 30, 1794, to Attend the Treaty Between the United States and the Six Nations," *Ethnohistory*, XII (Fall, 1965), pp. 293-95; Francois Alexandre Frederic, Duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Travels Through the United States of North America*, 2 vols., London, 1799, I, pp. 112, 115; James Kent, *Western Circuit Journal*, June 1798, James Kent Papers, Reel 6, Library of Congress.

and storekeeper active in Washington County, in upstate New York, and in Albany, and New York City, Matthews became profoundly troubled by the cultural and economic changes affecting the American republic in the early nineteenth century. He dreaded the increasing pace and volume of commercial activity and he hated the new assertiveness by many women in family governance, religious meetings, and moral reform societies. He blamed the innovations of his times for his own inability to control his fortunes and his family: he failed financially and he could not impose his religious views upon his wife, despite regular and brutal beatings.¹⁷

In 1830 the divine spirit Matthias took possession of Matthews's body and vociferously preached a restoration of Old Testament patriarchy, with a vengeance. Matthias insisted that men could initiate the New Jerusalem in America by rejecting market transactions and by reasserting their complete spiritual and material power over women and children. Confined to her household and preoccupied with housekeeping, a woman must instantly and completely obey her husband's command and implicitly accept his spiritual dictation. Like Wilkinson, Matthias proposed establishing his New Jerusalem in western New York. For Matthias the New Jerusalem would be a vast and gleaming city centered upon an immense temple, larger than Solomon's, that would be filled with thrones, candelabra, vessels, and implements "of massive silver and pure gold." He prophesied that in 1836 God would reveal and provide "all the treasures of the earth" necessary to construct the New Jerusalem. The temple would regulate a communal economy meant to eliminate all the deceits, inequality, wrangling, and waste of the market. Instead of engaging in commerce, farmers and mechanics "from all parts of the world" would bring their surplus produce and products to the great storehouse. In return, they could withdraw whatever they needed from its shelves and bins.¹⁸

For want of Wilkinson's serenity, Matthias enjoyed only a brief, limited, and volatile influence. In 1832 he gathered about a dozen followers into his authoritarian household. At first they lived in New York City but later moved up the Hudson to relocate in Sing-Sing, a riverside town. In 1834 the household collapsed under pressure from hostile neighbors and amidst bitter internal recriminations over their practice of spiritual wifery and over suspicion that Matthias had poisoned his chief disciple. Acquitted of murder but convicted of beating his own daughter, Matthias served four months in jail. Upon release, he fled westward to Kirtland, Ohio where he sought out his fellow prophet, Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder of the Mormon faith. Rejected by Smith, Matthias drifted further west into obscurity, perhaps dying in Iowa in 1841.¹⁹

V. NEW ISRAELITES

The "New Israelites" were a separatist sect in Middletown, Vermont. In 1789 Nathaniel Wood, Sr., and his extended family announced that they were the

17. Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias*, New York, 1994, pp. 49-90.

18. Johnson and Wilentz, *Kingdom of Matthias*, pp. 91-100; William L. Stone, *Matthias and His Impostures: or, the Progress of Fanaticism, Illustrated in the Extraordinary Case of Robert Matthews, And Some of His Forerunners and Disciples*, New York, 1835, pp. 134-37, 159-62 (all quotations are from Stone).

19. Johnson and Wilentz, *Kingdom of Matthias*, pp. 3-6, 127-64, 177.

descendants of the ancient Jews and established their own separate church. In 1799 a seer named Wingate arrived in Middletown as the guest of the Woods and of their friend William Cowdry. Guided by Wingate, the New Israelites began to feature divining rods in their rituals. A divining rod was a freshly-cut, forked branch of witch hazel that a seer held in his fists with the center prong pointing away. Convinced that the rods jerked in response to divine, supernatural power, the New Israelites gathered to ask questions of the rods in order to predict the future, seek lost property, detect medicinal roots, search for buried treasures. Guided by the rods, the New Israelites began to construct a temple, and they sought out buried pirate treasures - which they believed littered the hills of Vermont. By employing magic spells to disarm the spirits guarding the treasures and by digging at night during a full moon, they expected to find sufficient gold to pave the streets of their "New Jerusalem." In late 1800 their rods predicted that the end of the world would occur on the night of January 14, 1801. When January 15 arrived on schedule, the sect lost face and confidence. It also did not help their credibility when it became known that Wingate had been a counterfeiter. The sect collapsed in local disgrace and most of the members migrated to western New York.²⁰

The New Israelites anticipated the Mormon church founded by Joseph Smith, Jr., in 1830. Both the New Israelites and the Mormons heeded latter-day divine revelations, stressed the imminent advent of the Christian millennium, claimed Jewish ancestry, and sought separation from the gentiles by building a New Jerusalem. The continuity was more than coincidental. The New Israelite William Cowdry was the father of Oliver Cowdry who helped transcribe the *Book of Mormon* that Smith allegedly found buried in a hillside near Palmyra, New York. There is also evidence that Wingate was an early associate of Joseph Smith, Jr., in his career as a treasure-seeker that eventually evolved into his role as a latter-day prophet.²¹

All five dreamers of a New Jerusalem reacted, mostly in horror, to the complex and contradictory medley of changes affecting American society: especially, the continued elaboration of the capitalist market; the simultaneous and paradoxical growth of both democratic rhetoric and economic inequality; and the new possibilities for women to remake their traditionally patriarchal households. But the five dreamers differed dramatically in their reaction to those developments. Both Hartwick and Husband sought the New Jerusalem but the first meant to cure excessive democracy and egalitarianism while the second assailed the inordinate power of a corrupt elite. Where the Public Universal Friend sought to disarm the gendered construction of roles and authority, the spirit Matthias angrily sought their reaffirmation. Although they all found inspiration in the same Biblical passages, principally the Book of Ezekiel, their five New Jerusalems took different shape from the personal concerns and visions of their charismatic founders.

The New Israelites, Jemima Wilkinson, John Christopher Hartwick, Robert Matthews, and Hermon Husband all failed to establish an enduring New Jerusalem in the North American hinterland. Indeed, only Wilkinson succeeded in founding and sustaining a community in her lifetime. Nonetheless, the dream of a New Jerusalem did reach fruition later in the nineteenth century through the Mormon

20. Barnes Frisbie, *The History of Middletown, Vermont in Three Discourses*, Rutland, Vt., 1867, pp. 43-65; Robert Parks and Hiland Paul, *History of Wells, Vermont, For the First Century After Its Settlement*, pp. 79-82.

21. Frisbie, *Middletown*, pp. 57, 62; Marini, *Radical Sects*, p. 55.

Church of Joseph Smith, Jr., the spiritual successor of the New Israelites. During the 1830s and 1840s, despite intense harassment by hostile neighbors, Smith established viable and growing communities of followers in Ohio, Missouri, and Illinois. After Smith's death at the hands of an angry mob, his successor Brigham Young led the Mormons westward to colonize the distant land beside the Great Salt Lake in what is now Utah. There the New Jerusalem prospered, and there it persists to this day, growing in wealth, numbers, and power.²²

22. Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, Chicago, 1984; Klaus J. Hanson, *Mormonism and the American Experience*, Chicago, 1981.