



The Messenger : The Rise and Fall of Elijah Muhammad

By Karl Evanzz

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Here, eagerly anticipated, is the definitive biography of Elijah Muhammad (né Elija Poole), a sharecropper's son with a fourth- grade education who became one of the most controversial Americans of the twentieth century, the founder and "Prophet" of the Nation of Islam, a movement dedicated to black separatism and self-empowerment.

Though Muhammad's main argument--that white people were innately evil ("devils," he called them)--ran counter to the precepts of orthodox Islam, he was the chief influence in the conversion of nearly four million African Americans to Islam, touching in the process the lives of figures ranging from Muhammad Ali and Jesse Jackson to Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. But in his desperate grasp for power, Muhammad also amassed a huge personal fortune at the expense of his followers. He was a party to ritualistic homicides, had illicit affairs galore, and was quick to betray his friends and charges, most notably Malcolm X. In brief, he violated every ideal and principle that he espoused.

With the cooperation of some of Elijah Muhammad's children and former apostles and with access to previously unreleased FBI files, Karl Evanzz gives us an unprecedented account of the life of the man whose philosophy continues, long after his death, to shape race relations in America.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

This well-documented biography by Karl Evanzz of *The Washington Post* shows how a poor, Georgia-born mulatto preacher and laborman named Elijah Poole, who moved to Detroit in the 1930s to escape the brutality of the South, reinvented himself as the leader of the controversial Nation of Islam. Evanzz sifts through years of rumors and myths to uncover a proud and politically shrewd demagogue whose frail, asthma-prone body contrasted his fiery antiwhite rhetoric and proclamations of black self-reliance. "To millions of African Americans," Evanzz writes, "Elijah Muhammad was not so much a prophet as a self-schooled psychoanalyst who, like the highly celebrated Sigmund Freud, advanced theories about the nature and role of religion and race in mental dysfunction."

Painstaking research reveals how Muhammad synthesized the philosophies of Marcus Garvey and Booker T. Washington, as well as updating tenets of Freemasonry and the Moorish Science Temple to create the Nation's dogma. Evanzz also recounts Muhammad's imprisonment for draft dodging, one of many run-ins with law enforcement, and his efforts to build schools for the children of his followers. Among the biographical details uncovered with the help of recently declassified FBI files is the identity of Muhammad's greatest teacher, the mysterious W.D. Fard, as well as confirmation of the many children Muhammad fathered out of wedlock. The FBI files also add insight into the treachery, distrust, and violence that gripped the Nation after the 1965 assassination of Muhammad's former second-in-command, Malcolm X. By and large, Evanzz presents a fair, scholarly account of one of the 20th century's most infamous and influential Afro-American figures. --*Eugene Holley Jr.*

From Publishers Weekly

As a followup to his acclaimed *The Judas Factor: The Plot to Kill Malcolm X*, Evanzz recounts the "incredible and multidimensional" life of Elijah Muhammad, cofounder of the Nation of Islam. Evanzz begins by meticulously reviewing the history of Muhammad's family during slavery and Reconstruction, leading up to his birth in Georgia in 1897, during the brutal Jim Crow era, which shaped his belief that whites are inherently evil. Drawing on extensive research and interviews with Muhammad's family, former associates and rivals, Evanzz reveals a determined, wily and resourceful figure who got rich from his schemes, ruled his followers by intimidation and fathered an enormous number of illegitimate children. He also chronicles Muhammad's powerful influence on key players of the civil rights movement, such as Dr. King, Muhammad Ali, Jesse Jackson and the Black Panthers. Fresh access to FBI files provides several surprises about the NOI's rocky start, the pro-Axis orientation of its leaders during WWII and the government's extensive surveillance and harassment of its followers. The book also includes one of the most complete accounts to date of the final, bitter confrontation between Muhammad and his chief disciple, Malcolm X, arguing that the FBI's COINTELPRO campaign forced the rift between the pair, which resulted in Malcolm's grisly Harlem assassination and the disintegration of the Nation of Islam into a fractured "Tower of Babel." Although Evanzz's first-rate analysis may generate dispute among the NOI's thousands of faithful followers, it is a fascinating, long overdue study of one of the most intriguing personalities of the 20th century. (Dec.)

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From Library Journal

Evanzz, a researcher and writer for the *Washington Post* and author of *The Judas Factor: The Plot To Kill Malcolm X*, has written a detailed critical biography of one of America's leading black nationalists of the

20th century. One of the founders of the Nation of Islam (NOI), Muhammad helped convert thousands of African Americans to the religion popularly known as the Black Muslims. Evanzz concludes that Muhammad was essentially a con man who used his considerable powers of persuasion to get rich and seduce women. Especially fascinating is Evanzz's extensive use of FBI files to make his case. Marred by several factual errors and occasionally overwritten, *The Messenger* nonetheless serves as a convincing exposé that also offers an interesting account of the souring relationship between Muhammad and his great disciple, Malcolm X. Recommended for larger public and academic libraries.

-Anthony O. Edmonds, *Ball State Univ., Muncie, IN*

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