



The Branch Davidians and Seventh-day Adventists

by Kenneth G. C. Newport

Without doubt, the most disturbing of events in the history of the Seventh-day Adventist movement were those that took place in Waco, Texas, from February 28 to April 19, 1993. "Waco," as it has become known among academics in a variety of disciplines, has had lasting consequences: scholars of religious movements are still debating the significance of what happened in terms of the inner dynamics of religious groups and, in the United States, legal battles such as the recent wrongful death lawsuit are still in progress. Most important, the deaths of some eighty-four persons have left a negative legacy on the lives of many families, friends, and survivors.¹

The obvious question to ask is of course "why?" Why did it happen? What led to this siege and its terrible consequences? Of course, many answers have been offered before, but most of what has been said on this issue has been at best only part of the answer. Indeed, some of the contributions have not even been that. For example, one particular view to which not a few seem to have subscribed, including some in the Seventh-day

Adventist Church, seems completely wide of the mark. According to this view, Waco was the result of a combination of Koresh's presumed insanity, his manipulative powers, and the sheep-like mentality of his followers, or, to put it in popular terms, Waco was the predictable outcome of brainwashed acolytes mindlessly following a demented and manipulative leader.² However, as sociologists of religion know only too well, charismatic leaders of Koresh's ilk are seldom, if ever, insane, and those who follow such leaders are often persons of the highest intellectual calibre, completely in control of their mental faculties and fully able to exercise free choice. Whatever went on at Waco, it was not simply a descent into religious insanity and brainwashing.³

Others have sought to analyze the extent to which the deaths were due to the bungled actions of the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms and the FBI. A good deal of the heavyweight academic literature published to date has focused precisely on this issue.⁴ The results of these studies have been distressing, and it is now generally argued that the actions of these government agencies did contribute to the catastrophic outcome. However, any explanation of Waco, it seems to me, must be able to explain not only why the FBI handled the situation so badly, but also why the Davidians themselves behaved in ways that the FBI did not anticipate. Indeed, it must also explain what the Branch Davidians were doing at Mt. Carmel in the first place, where they came from, what their beliefs were, and why they seemed so determined to stand by those beliefs and the leader who exemplified them.

Starting from these assumptions, then, that Koresh was not insane, that his followers were not brainwashed, and that an adequate explanation of Waco must involve more than just pointing a finger at the Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms and the FBI, a fresh and full enquiry into the underlying reasons for the Waco tragedy is called for. Such a task is currently underway, and in this brief article I wish to set out the general context of that project.⁵

The Seventh-day Adventist Context

It is my fundamental belief that what happened at Waco is in essence explicable only if seen in the context of Seventh-day Adventism, that is to say, if Waco is going to make sense it will be Seventh-day Adventist sense.⁶ This belief partly comes as a result

of the simple observation that almost all those who lived at Mt. Carmel were either former or not-yet-disfellowshipped Seventh-day Adventists, and that the mission of the Branch Davidians seems not to have been to the world-at-large, but to members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁷ Livingstone Fagan, for example, had been a Seventh-day Adventist pastor immediately prior to leaving for Waco; the Henry family were all members of the Old Trafford Seventh-day Adventist Church in Manchester, England; and Steve Schneider and indeed David Koresh himself had been Seventh-day Adventists. Koresh was disfellowshipped as, it seems, was Schneider.⁸

Given this intimate link between Seventh-day Adventism and the Branch Davidians we must surely explore further the possibility that there is something within Seventh-day Adventism itself, something perhaps in Seventh-day Adventist self-identity or theology, that predisposed certain persons to accept the Branch Davidian worldview. So what is the link? What is there about Seventh-day Adventism that apparently predisposed some members of that community, including Koresh himself, to become Branch Davidians?

Before proceeding with this question it must be acknowledged that the methodology adopted here has an obvious weakness. In stressing the Seventh-day Adventist context for Branch Davidianism one might rightly be accused of ignoring the many, often very fundamental, differences in the traditions. I recognize this. I recognize, for example, that the apparent interest of the Branch Davidians in guns is wholly different from the traditional role of Seventh-day Adventists as noncombatants. Similarly, I recognize that Koresh's taking of several wives is not in accord with Adventist doctrine, and his view that his literal children were destined to be the twenty-four elders gathered around the throne of Revelation 4 is a view that Seventh-day Adventists would find totally unacceptable, if not blasphemous.

I recognize also that Koresh's claim to be "a" (though probably not "the") Christ is totally foreign to anything claimed by anyone in mainstream Adventism. One could go on, for there is no doubt whatsoever that Koresh in particular and the Branch Davidians in general differed on numerous and often very basic points from the Seventh-day Adventist mother faith that had given them birth. They were rather wayward children and as such they behaved and thought in ways that their parents would find totally unacceptable. But children they were, and as with physical

children, they shared some basic characteristics with their parents, characteristics that meant the claims they made to other prospective Branch Davidian converts from Seventh-day Adventism at least made some sense, even if at first they sounded rather strange. Later in this article I will explore some of those doctrinal links.

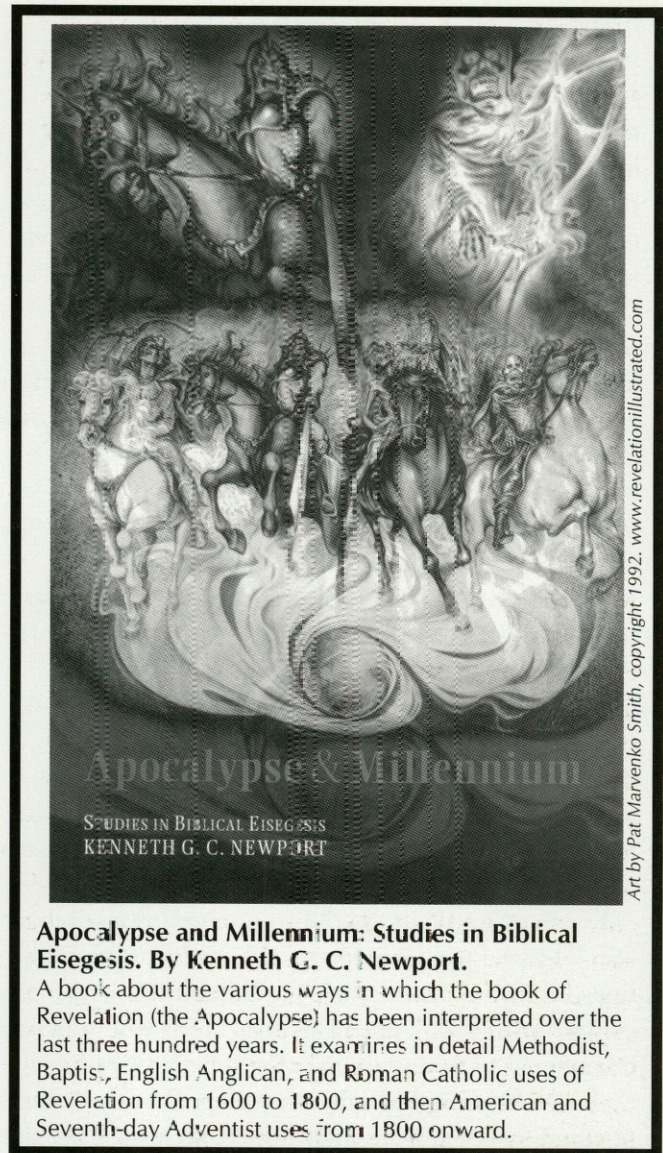
A Brief History of Branch Davidianism

Before going further, however, a brief sketch of the historical roots of Branch Davidianism seems in order, since it will show the historical context of the movement. The history of the Branch Davidian movement is complex.⁹ However, the basic trajectory from William Miller to David Koresh is direct and relatively easy to trace. In a nutshell, what happened was as follows. As is common knowledge, it was from among the ranks of the disappointed Millerites that the early Seventh-day Adventist Church emerged. Further, it was directly from Seventh-day Adventism that, in the 1930s, a movement known as the Shepherd's Rod came into existence.

In the 1940s, this Shepherd's Rod movement found it expedient to change its name to Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. Due to another failed prediction regarding the end of the world similar to that suffered by the Millerites, the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists almost went out of existence in 1959, but were saved from that fate by the rise of another leader, Ben Roden, who reformed the group under the name of the Branch Davidians. Leadership of this group passed from Ben to his wife Lois and then, after some internal struggle, passed to Vernon Howell, otherwise known as David Koresh.

The most significant person in the emergence of this trajectory of Seventh-day Adventism was Victor T. Houteff (pronounced "Hoteff"), a Bulgarian immigrant to the United States who was converted to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1919, being baptized on May 10 at Rockford, Illinois.¹⁰ During the 1920s, Houteff became increasingly convinced that he had been called by God to reform the Seventh-day Adventist Church from within. The Church had, he argued, erred on several fundamental doctrinal points, especially those that relate to the interpretation and fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

Thus, the opening words of volume one of



Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis. By Kenneth G. C. Newport.

A book about the various ways in which the book of Revelation (the Apocalypse) has been interpreted over the last three hundred years. It examines in detail Methodist, Baptist, English Anglican, and Roman Catholic uses of Revelation from 1600 to 1800, and then American and Seventh-day Adventist uses from 1800 onward.

Houteff's two-volume work *The Shepherd's Rod*: "It is the intention of this book to reveal the truth of the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7 but the chief object of this publication is to bring about a reformation among God's people. The truth herein contained is divided into seven sections, giving proof from seven different angles, to prevent any doubt or confusion. This subject is made clear by the use of the Bible and the writings given by the Spirit of Prophecy." With this call Houteff launched his mission to reform Seventh-day Adventism. He had little concern about Christians in general, and less still about nonbelievers. His mission, as he understood it, was to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which he believed to be the true church, but one that had in the latter days slipped from the purity of the faith.

It is of fundamental importance here that this direct link between the Shepherd's Rod and the older

Seventh-day Adventist Church is noted. Houteff was not starting a new movement, but rather seeking to reform an older one from within. Even allowing for the fact that, sociologically speaking, it is often precisely this kind of "movement from within" that provides the seed from which another movement altogether will eventually grow, it is likely that that seed will share at least some of the major characteristics of its parent body.¹¹ In the case of the Shepherd's Rod this is certainly so, for much of what is found in the Shepherd's Rod tradition, including views of "the remnant," the importance of typology as a hermeneutical method, the status of Ellen White, and the historicist, premillennial reading of Daniel and Revelation, is simply a continuation, with some further fine tuning, of established Seventh-day Adventist views. To put it in Thomas Kuhn's terms, there was no paradigm shift as yet.¹² Houteff was working within the older paradigmatic structures.

Houteff's voice, or, as he would have said, "The Rods," (cf. Micah 6.9) fell on deaf ears, and like so many other would-be reformers he was eventually forced to leave the ranks of the group he sought to reform. On November 20, 1930, a motion was passed by the Olympic Exposition Park Seventh-day Adventist Church in Los Angeles disfellowshipping him.¹³ He did not give up easily. Now from the sidelines rather than as a active participant in the game, he continued to shout advice and warnings to his former teammates. Over the course of the next years his output was prodigious, the most important statement of his views by far coming in the completed 559-page work *The Shepherd's Rod*, and he was successful in gaining a modest following. In 1935, the group took up residence at the Mount Carmel Center in Waco, Texas. It was in this area, though not on this precise site, that the movement and its most prominent successor, the Branch Davidians, remained until April 1993. The land remains the property of the Branch Davidians and in 2000 a new Branch Davidian church opened on the site.¹⁴

In 1942, the pressures of conscription made it necessary for the group formally to take on a name. To this point it had operated under the title of the chief publication of its founder, namely *The Shepherd's Rod*. It chose "The Davidian Seventh-day Adventists" in recognition of the fact that Houteff and his followers saw themselves first and foremost as Seventh-day Adventists whose tradition they claimed as their own. However, the word "Davidian" was added in an attempt to identify the movement as one that looked

forward to the restoration of the Kingdom of David prior to the premillennial coming of Christ. This "kingdom," which would be based in Jerusalem, would be ruled by the antitype of King David.¹⁵

Houteff continued the leadership of the movement until his death, at which point it was taken up by his wife, Florence. Her rule was disastrous and the movement reached the point of near collapse, especially after the failure of her prophecy that the world would end on April 22, 1959. During this time the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists sought to bring the Davidians back into the fold, but the attempt failed.¹⁶

Florence Houteff's role as leader of the Davidians did not go unchallenged and after some dispute and failure to reach agreement on the issue of leadership a second "Davidian" group arose, namely the "Branch" Davidians. The word "Branch" was added to the name since "the Branch" was the name of Christ himself. The group continued to look forward to the establishment of his Kingdom; this premillennial rule of Christ would be nonphysical, but nevertheless very real.¹⁷

This "Branch Davidian" successor to the nearly collapsed Davidian Seventh-day Adventist movement began under the leadership of Ben Roden (1902-78), another ex-Adventist reformer.¹⁸ Roden felt that God had called him to bring order to the increasing chaos of the Davidians following the death of Houteff, and saw the action of God in the history of salvation as coming to a head in the three final stages. The first of these was the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the establishment of the Sabbath truth, the second was the Davidians and the gathering of the remnant people, and the third was the Branch Davidians. This latter movement had the seal of the name of Christ (the Branch) and constituted the hub of the 144,000 of Revelation 7:4; 14:1, 3. These 144,000 were to be formed perfectly into the image of Christ prior to Christ's coming in glory. There is of course a basic theological continuity with the Adventist tradition here, at least on points one and two.

After Ben's death, the leadership was taken by his wife, Lois, whose claim to the office had first been made even before her husband's demise. Her energies were largely given to seeking to establish the doctrine of the femininity of the Holy Spirit, and the view that the second appearance of the Messiah would see him (her) in feminine form.

Lois was not, however, the only relative of Ben

Roden to stake a claim to the leadership of the movement. Their son, George, was particularly clear that God had called him to this role, and he sought to wrest control from his mother. Her choice of successor, however, was not her own son, but a young man named Vernon Howell, later to be known as David Koresh. After a complex series of events, including the famous “resurrection contest” organized by George, Howell and his followers took possession of the center on March 23, 1988, and they remained there until the fire in April 1993.¹⁹

There is, then, a basic historical continuity between Seventh-day Adventism and Branch

and develops in ways that are unconnected to the older mother faith.

However, this is not the pattern one observes in Davidianism/Branch Davidianism. This trajectory has been substantially shackled to its Adventist mother faith from which it has never truly broken free. There has been no significant development of a separate Branch Davidian leadership—Houteff, as we have seen, was an Adventist, and Roden and Koresh were both recruited directly from the ranks of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Other key figures such as Schneider, Livingstone Fagan, and Wayne Martin were direct ex-Adventists. Thus the umbilical cord has never quite been cut; Branch Davidianism has remained inseparably tied to, indeed dependent for its viability upon, Seventh-day Adventism.

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Theological Continuity

It would be wise at this point to say a little more about these historical and socio-

Davidianism. Further, and in my view very importantly, this is not quite the same as saying, for example, that Methodism is a continuation of Anglicanism, for in the case of Branch Davidianism and Seventh-day Adventism the relationship seems to go beyond the birth of one movement from another. This is seen in two obvious ways. First theological continuity, which I will address shortly, and second in the case of the extraction of Davidian/Branch Davidian converts and particularly Branch Davidian leaders.

John and Charles Wesley, of course, were both Anglican priests as were many other individuals central to the early Methodist leadership. However, after the introduction into the Methodist tradition of lay preaching and, in 1784, of ordination, there developed an entirely separate line of leadership passed on through the generations so that quite quickly the Methodist leadership lost its contact with the Anglican hierarchy and it was soon no longer the case that Methodist leaders had been Anglicans. The same is true of the general membership. Such a movement quickly learns to stand on its own two feet

logical factors relative to Davidians and Seventh-day Adventists. However, in the space that remains I want to touch briefly on what seems to be another aspect of continuity, namely overlap in theology. This article will then conclude by suggesting why the kind of analysis I have been conducting might be important.

The question of the theological continuity between Seventh-day Adventism and Branch Davidianism is complex and we can touch here on only two key points: the use of typology as a method of biblical interpretation and some general aspects of the interpretation of the book of Revelation.

The Use of Typology

In many ways the use of typology is perhaps the most obvious point of continuity between the Branch Davidians and mainstream Seventh-day Adventist theology. By “typology,” I mean the assumption or, one might say, methodological premise, that certain parts of the Old Testament foreshadow the New. In Christian biblical interpretation the method is at least

as old as St. John, who presented Christ as the “real” or, in later terminology, the “antitypical” Passover lamb. Readers will hardly need reminding of the centrality to the Seventh-day Adventist theological system of the typological interpretation of the Old Testament sanctuary service to be found in the book of Hebrews. It is safe to conclude, I think, that typology is a central part of Seventh-day Adventism.

It is absolutely central also in the Branch Davidian tradition. Indeed a good deal of that which is distinctive in Branch Davidian theology seems to be the result of an extension of Seventh-day Adventist typological hermeneutic. In fact, I would suggest that to some degree the appeal that the Branch Davidian message had to mainstream Seventh-day Adventists—and that it had such appeal is clear from the recruitment statistics—is centered upon the basic consistency between traditional Seventh-day Adventist typological interpretation of the Old Testament and that offered by Branch Davidian theologians. We need look no further than the name. Almost from its inception Davidianism looked for the coming of the antitypical King David who would rule over an antitypical kingdom. Such a view is pre-Branch: Victor Houteff looked for the coming of this figure, whereas Florence Houteff seems to have argued that Victor himself would be raised from the dead and return as the antitypical King.²⁰ From Davidianism it came into Branch Davidianism, and both the Rodens continued to look for the antitypical David.

Perhaps an even more obvious illustration of both this particular aspect of typological interpretation and the use of the method in general is the fact that Vernon Howell changed his name to David Koresh. The reason for this change lies in typology. As we have noted already, Branch Davidians, and indeed before them the Davidians, had looked for the antitypical King David. Vernon Howell thought he was that figure and so changed his name from Vernon to David. But he took it a little further. Not only was he the antitypical King David, he was also the antitypical Cyrus, or, in Hebrew, the antitypical “vr,wOK”; his “type” was the Cyrus of Isaiah 44, 45, and so forth, who had come to destroy Babylon. The Babylon that David Koresh had come to destroy was, of course, the antitypical one, namely apostate religion. (Incidentally we note another common thread here, for the equation of latter-day, antitypical Babylon with apostate religion—both Protestant and Roman Catholic—is, as we know, a commonplace in Seventh-day Adventist literature).²¹

Much of this detail is of course entirely foreign to the Seventh-day Adventist view of things. Adventists do not look for the coming of the antitypical kingdom of David on this earth to be ruled over by a particular individual. Neither do they look for an antitypical Cyrus to destroy antitypical Babylon. What is instructive, however, is to note that when individuals like Steve Schneider, an exceptionally impressive preacher who conducted a recruitment campaign in Manchester, England, in the very early 1990s, used the typological method of interpreting the Old Testament to seek to persuade his listeners, all Seventh-day Adventists, to accept the “new light” as he called it, he was at least speaking a language that his audience could understand and with which they already had some basic sympathy. As Seventh-day Adventists, members of Schneider’s audience were fully acquainted with the basic idea that parts of the Old Testament foreshadow what is to come. They knew all about types and antitypes. Schneider simply extended this scheme to cover the notion of an antitypical Cyrus and an antitypical David and in doing so he was in effect asking his audience to go further along a road that they had already traveled. They were not asked to set out on a new route altogether.

The Book of Revelation

We turn now, briefly, to the interpretation of Revelation. Whatever else we know or do not know about the theological views of the Branch Davidians in general and of David Koresh in particular, one thing is certain: the book of Revelation was central. I have to say straightaway that on many individual points the Branch Davidian interpretation of Revelation is quite different from that traditionally adopted in Seventh-day Adventist circles. I would add further that in fact Koresh in particular took the Branch Davidians along exegetical pathways completely unknown to the Adventist tradition. It would be very easy to list them and to counter with such statements as “well, that is not the Seventh-day Adventist view on the seven seals,” or “Adventists have never argued that the two hundred million horsemen of Revelation 9:16 are an exact number.” However, I think it would be a mistake to get bogged down in too much detail here, for in doing that we would stand the risk of failing to see the woods for the trees.

I am keen to understand what made Koresh’s and

Schneider's converts listen to and accept what they had to say, and it will simply not do to argue that it was all because of highly manipulative techniques or anything similar. The audience must have found something intrinsically appealing and, in my view, that appeal is related to basic theological continuity. It is worth noting in passing that Koresh seemed to give people a "cooling off" period before accepting them into the Mt. Carmel community. For example, after member David Thibodeau had been given "the light" Koresh sent him home to Bangor, Maine, for a while to think things through. Such behavior seems entirely out of keeping with the view that Koresh wore people

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down through endless preaching and then got them to accept things when in a weakened state.²²

Koresh's central claim was that God had given him the task of interpreting the book of Revelation. It was his prophetic task, he argued, to explain this book to the world in these last days. In this context, there is a very interesting account, given by Thibodeau, of what appears to have been David Koresh's own experience of his call. The vision came in the late 1970s as Koresh—or Howell as he was then known—was praying. Suddenly, he said, he felt he was being taken up an elevator shaft and after the ascent he saw two gigantic walls one of which had "law" written on it, the other "prophecy." Koresh then told how he saw God himself, who had in one hand a book, while holding out the other to Koresh, who reached forward for it.

What happened next is not described. I suspect, but suspicion is all it is, that if we were able to follow this up, we would find that this was seen by Koresh as a call to open the book that God had in his hand—his "anointing" perhaps as a chosen one: a Christ. The meaning of this word in both Greek and Hebrew (and

Koresh had at least a smattering of both) is of course "anointed one." Koresh believed that he, like Jesus (Cyrus too is called "anointed"—Isa. 45), had been "anointed" or "set apart" by God for a number of purposes, the most important of which in Koresh's case was to unlock the secrets of the book of Revelation. This is the root of the popular misconception that Koresh thought that he was Jesus.

Not many, perhaps, would be sympathetic to Koresh's claims to this visionary experience. Perhaps he was simply lying. Others might say that he had the "vision," but that it was not actually given him by God. I do not want to get into this. What is impor-

tant, I think, is how such a claim might have been taken by other Seventh-day Adventists, people like Livingstone Fagan or Cliff Sellers, perhaps. Why would people who had a good education (Fagan was a graduate and Sellers was an "A" student in the final year of an Adventist undergraduate religion degree) be likely to accept Koresh's claim to be the one who had come to reveal the prophecies?

It has to be said that such individuals would probably not have ruled out altogether the possibility that Koresh was the kind of figure he claimed to be, for there was already something in their tradition that made it at least a theoretical possibility. In particular, Koresh appealed to Adventist thinking on the seven thunders of Revelation 10:6. Ellen White herself had once said that the messages of these thunders "relate to future events which will be disclosed in their order," a thought reproduced in substance in the *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, which says: "These messages of the seven thunders obviously were not a revelation for the people of John's day. They doubtless revealed details of the messages that were to be proclaimed at 'the end of time.'"²³

Koresh simply plugged into this and said in effect "the time has come and God has sent me to unlock the secrets of the seven thunders and indeed the whole of the book of Revelation." He thought that the message of the seven thunders was a progressively revealed message given in a sequence of seven messages or messengers. These messengers stretch from Miller himself down through White, the Houteffs, and the

Rodens to Koresh himself. Koresh hence claimed to be the seventh messenger or seventh "angel," and in so doing he appealed directly to Ellen White, quoting her saying that a figure who could reveal further light was yet to come.²⁴

Few, perhaps, would want to follow Koresh in this. However, the basic point should not be missed: on this issue as on many others Koresh took his cue from Ellen White and parts of mainstream Adventist thinking, and, as Paul discovered when he preached his new message in the old synagogues, when you have something radical to say to potential converts, it is best to start on common ground.

I now come into sensitive territory, and not many Adventists will agree with what I have to say, but it does seem to me at least that it is also true that the very fact Seventh-day Adventism has laid claim to "the Spirit of Prophecy" as a mark of the end-time church may have also played a role in this context. This is true in a general sense of Adventists being rather unusual among Christian denominations in allowing for the possibility (in the case of Ellen White, they claim, the fact) of the continuation of the prophetic gift. It is true also in the narrower sense of there already being in Adventism the model of an inspired interpreter of the inspired text. One is aware, of course, of the statements about lesser lights leading people to greater lights, but in a sense that is exactly the key point. Koresh said basically the same thing. He did, it is true, claim to have brand new revelations given to him, but like Ellen White, his chief claim to authority was that he was able to interpret the text, and like Ellen White he insisted that if what he said did not make sense in the context of the Bible itself, he ought to be dismissed as a fraud.²⁵

This kind of thinking ties in of course with the more general view in Adventism that God's act of revelation is progressive and that the gift of prophecy will continue to be one of the distinguishing marks of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. For example, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe* states, pretty unequivocally,

There is no biblical evidence that God would withdraw the spiritual gifts He gave the church before they had completed their purpose, which, according to Paul, was to bring the church "to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature

of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13).

Because the church has not yet reached this experience, it still needs all the gifts of the Spirit. These gifts, including the gift of prophecy, will continue to operate for the benefit of God's people until Christ returns. Consequently, Paul cautioned believers not to "quench the Spirit" or "despise prophecies."²⁶

In the book, of course, this is all a preface to the claim that Ellen White manifested the prophetic gift, but time and time again both here and elsewhere in Adventist literature one is reminded that it is a general principle that prophecy is one of the gifts of the Spirit and that God will give the gifts of Spirit, including prophecy, to the remnant church.²⁷ Ellen White may have manifested the gift. But in theory at least she was not the last one who would do so. The standard Seventh-day Adventist argument appears to be not that God would send a prophet, that is Ellen White, for the last days, but rather that the gift of prophecy did not end with the New Testament and that, as Ellen White demonstrates, the gift is still active in his remnant community. There is nothing really to suggest that Ellen White would necessarily be the last.

Conclusions

It is hence my view that, despite first appearances, appearances that the Seventh-day Adventist Church has, for good reasons, been keen to stress, it simply will not do to describe the success of Koresh (and Schneider) in recruiting Seventh-day Adventists to the Branch Davidian cause as an act of unfathomable (if not satanic) intellectual deception. The Seventh-day Adventist ground provided fertile soil for the Branch Davidian seed. The two movements are inextricably intertwined historically, doctrinally, and in terms of the core membership.

What this means, it seems to me, is that if we are going to understand the Branch Davidian phenomenon, a phenomenon that has been of importance in the context of American civil, political, and religious history to an extent that far outweighs its numerical size, we are going to need to see them in the context from which they came: Seventh-day Adventism. It is true, of course, that formally the Branch Davidians are an "offshoot of an offshoot" (a phrase used in

Adventist sources at the time of the siege), but it is an offshoot of an offshoot that has historically been almost entirely parasitic upon the mother faith for its existence. To see the Branch Davidians in any other context is to misunderstand them, and to misunderstand them will do no one any good at all.

It will do no academic good. For unless we understand the appeal of Branch Davidianism to some Seventh-day Adventists in general we will not appreciate how it is that some persons come to join groups such as that led by David Koresh. It may be advantageous in some contexts simply to see the phenomenon of Waco as wholly inexplicable, or to argue that it was

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all due to brainwashing and manipulation, but that will hardly further our understanding of how and why people really join religious movements.

It will do no prophylactic good, for unless we learn the lessons of the past we cannot expect to be prepared for the future. Other Wacos will happen and unless we learn how the members of such groups think and what the dynamics of the group are we may not be in any better a position in the future than the FBI showed itself to be in the past to deal with such situations. Ignorance, especially that of the anticult lobby, must be counterbalanced. The academic guild has a responsibility to play its part in that exercise.

Finally, and here I hesitate to speak out of place, it seems to me that for the Seventh-day Adventist Church at least it will do no pastoral good. Of course this is not really my concern. I come at this as an outsider and primarily as an academic. However, in my work on the Davidians I do communicate with several of the Waco survivors, who in some cases have lost both family and friends and are now serving long prison sentences. Although the actual number of people involved is small, the

wounds that have been inflicted are in each individual case very deep. I have no authority to speak on this issue. Nevertheless, let me say this: Now that the dust has settled it might be appropriate to remember that at heart the events of Waco are a pastoral matter and not a public relations one.

Notes and References

1. This count includes the four BATF agents who died in the initial assault (Steve Willis, Todd McKeenan, Conway LaBleu, and Robert Williams). Of the Davidians, fifty-three adults and twenty-one children died during the period of the fire, though some died not from the fire itself but from gunshot wounds. Six other Davidians died during the period from February 28 to April 19, all from gunshot wounds.

2. Such a view was common not only in media reports at the time, but also in many books that came out in the immediate aftermath of Waco. See, for example, Brad Bailey and Bob Darden, *Mad Man in Waco* (Waco: WRS, 1993); Clifford L. Linedecker, *Massacre at Waco, Texas: The Shocking Story of Cult Leader*

David Koresh and the Branch Davidians (New York: St Martin's Paperbacks, 1993). On the second page of the preface to Cari Hoyt Haus and Madlyn Lewis Hamblin, *In the Wake of Waco: Why Were Adventists among the Victims?* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald, 1993), we read that one of the questions the authors wish to address is “why did intelligent, educated people give up their incomes, wives, freedom, and lives for a mentally unbalanced high school dropout?” See also Raymond Cottrell, “History and Fatal Theology of the Branch Davidians,” *Adventist Today* 1 (May-June 1993), which states that “Howell maintained tight control of every aspect of the lives of his followers, who were not allowed to think for themselves. Those who broke with him, he warned, were certain to go to hell.” Charles Scriven, in what is actually a rather open-minded piece, thinks that “religious nuts” is an appropriate description of the Branch Davidians, who were “not just weird but weird to the point of lunacy.” Scriven, “Fundamentalism is a Disease, A Demonic Perversion,” *Spectrum* 23 (May 1993): 45. On the Adventist response to Waco see also several other articles in *ibid.*, 2-52, and in particular the excellent account given by Ronald Lawson in “Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety: Patterns of Diversity within a Sect Reducing Tension with Society,” *Journal of the Society of the Sociology of Religion* 34 (1995): 323-41.

3. It is a mistake to equate intelligence with the accumulation of degrees. However, the fact that (Douglas) Wayne Martin was a Harvard Law School graduate should

not be missed. Livingstone Fagan has a degree from Manchester Metropolitan University and an M.A. through Newbold College, whereas Steven Schneider had an M.A. in comparative religion from the University of Hawaii. On the issue of free choice see especially Eileen Barker, *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984). Regarding the internal logic operative within religious groups, and the extent to which religious views that outsiders might judge irrational are actually perfectly reasonable when seen from the perspective of the believer, see especially Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

4. The key works here are James R. Lewis, ed. *From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco* (Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield, 1994); James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Dick Reavis, *The Ashes of Waco: An Investigation* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995); Stuart A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Although sections in all four of these works deal with the beliefs of the group itself (this is especially the case with Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*), on top of the agenda is a discussion of the relative roles of the BATF, the FBI, and the Branch Davidians themselves in bringing the siege about in the first place and then engineering its catastrophic climax.

5. Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

6. This point is made by Haus and Hamblin, *In the Wake of Waco*: "Because Davidian theology could be built only on Adventist theology, you had to have an Adventist understanding even to understand what the Davidians were talking about" (p. 69). Lawson, "Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety," is also well worth reading in this context, as are several of the contributions to *Spectrum 23* (May 1993).

7. I have not been able to ascertain precisely how many of the Waco group were not former Seventh-day Adventists. Certainly there were at least two: Jaime (Jamie) Castillo, a Pentecostal who joined the Branch Davidians after Koresh answered an advertisement that Castillo had placed saying that he was interested in joining a Christian musical band. Castillo's mother was a Jehovah's Witness. David Thibodeau, a Waco survivor who was in Mt. Carmel throughout the enter siege, had no religious affiliation at all when he met David Koresh and Steve Schneider in a music shop. Reavis, *Ashes of Waco*, 292-93; David Thibodeau and Leon Whiteson, *A Place Called Waco* (New York: Public

Affairs, 1999), 17-18, 29-30.

8. Vernon Howell's mother, Bonnie Clark, had been raised a Seventh-day Adventist. He was initially sent to Dallas Seventh-day Adventist Academy, but later transferred to a public school. He did poorly and dropped out altogether in the eleventh grade. At the age of nine, he attended the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Richardson, Texas. In 1979 he attended a Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tyler, Texas, where he was baptized but later disfellowshipped. He was married to Rachel Jones and had several children by her and others; it is possible that these children included Cyrus, Star, Bobbie Lane, Dayland, Paige, Serenity, Chica, Latwan, Chanel, Startle, Mayanah and Hollywood. He was buried on June 4, 1993, in a quiet Texas ceremony.

Steven Schneider was a figure of central significance in Koreshian Branch Davidianism. He was raised a Seventh-day Adventist and attended Newbold College for a while, but was expelled after a bout of drunkenness. A resident of Hawaii, Schneider was introduced to Branch Davidianism by Marc Breault, a childhood friend, during the highly successful Branch Davidian recruitment campaign in Hawaii in 1986. Reports indicate that he was disfellowshipped from the Diamond Head Seventh-day Adventist Church in Hawaii (along with his wife Judy, Jeff Little, and Sheri Jewell) sometime in June or July 1986. Schneider himself conducted a campaign in England in 1990-91, and I have in my possession a series of twelve audio tapes of meetings he held in Manchester during that time. He was clearly a preacher of exceptional ability and persuasive power who, like Koresh, knew the biblical text extraordinarily well. During the siege, Schneider played the role of negotiator. According to Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* 216 n. 14, who quote from a report by the U.S. Department of Justice, FBI negotiators spent ninety-six hours talking to Schneider and sixty hours talking to Koresh. Schneider died from a gunshot wound fired into the mouth at close range.

9. See especially William L. Pitts, Jr., "Davidians and Branch Davidians, 1929-1987," in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 20-42

10. Victor Houteff, *History and Teachings of "The Shepherd's Rod"* (Los Angeles: Universal, 1930-32), 1:3.

11. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), argue this case throughout.

12. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

13. Houteff, *Shepherd's Rod*, 1:4-6

14. Photographs and other information are available at <www.rebuildthechurch.com>

www.religionbookreviews.com

15. Thus, on page 2 of *The Leviticus of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (1943), Houteff wrote:

The name, Davidian, deriving from the name of the king of Ancient Israel, accrues to this Association by reason of its following aspects: First, it is dedicated to the work of announcing and bringing forth the restoration (as predicted in Hosea 1:11; 3:5) of David's kingdom in antitype, upon the throne of which Christ, "the son of David," is to sit. Second, it purports itself to be the first of the first fruits of the living, the vanguard from among the present-day descendants of those Jews who composed the Early Christian Church. With the emergence of this vanguard and its army, the first fruits, from which are elected the 12,000 out of each of the twelve tribes of Jacob, "the 144,000" (Rev. 14:1; 7:2-8) who stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb (Rev. 14:1; 7:2-8), the reign of antitypical David begins.

16. Regarding Florence, see Pitts, "Davidians and Branch Davidians," 30-31. Between June 24 and July 7, 1959, the parties held a series of sixteen public meetings. These led to another forum, held between July 27 and August 7 of the same year. See Lowell Tarling, *The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism* (Barragga Bay, New South Wales, Australia: Galilee, 1981), 128.

17. The key passage here was Jer. 23:5: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth."

Following Houteff's lead, the Branch Davidians developed this understanding of "the Branch." According to them one should also consider Isa. 11:1: "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots." According to Ruth 4:17, Jesse was the father of David. This, as Pitts has noted, made the link with the Davidians while allowing the movement to argue for its own special status in the sequence of remnant communities. Pitts, "Davidians and Branch Davidians," 32.

18. Most of the biographical information I have on the Rodens comes from an address delivered at Ben's funeral, an audio copy of which is in my possession. What little else there is on Ben, Lois, and George Roden I have gathered together in my book *Apocalypse and Millennium*, 235-36. It is a pleasure to acknowledge the assistance of Mark Swett in compiling the information.

19. See Pitts, "Davidians and Branch Davidians," 36-38.

20. Such a view is hinted at in Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?* 38, and elsewhere in the literature on the topic, though I have not to date been able either to confirm it definitely or to exclude this belief on Florence Houteff's part.

21. See Koresh's "Letter to the Seventh-day Adventist Church": "My name is Cyrus, and I am here to destroy Babylon (Rev. 9:14)." A copy of this letter is in my possession. Francis D. Nichol et al., eds., *The Seventh-Day Adventist Biblical Commentary: The Holy Bible with Exegetical and Expository Comment in Seven Volumes* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1953), 7: 828-30, provides an extended note on the meaning of the term "Babylon" in Rev. 14:8.

22. Thibodeau and Whiteson, *A Place Called Waco*, 61.

23. See the *SDA Bible Commentary*, 7a: 971. At the

beginning of a tape of Koresh's thoughts on Revelation 13 he can be heard to say "but she [Ellen White] herself speaks of another angel to come." A copy of this tape is in my possession. I am not at all clear on the reference that Koresh is making (though from my other work on Koresh I would assume that he did have a direct reference in mind). The document "Will There Be Another Special Messenger?" by Arthur L. White, which is available from the Ellen G. White Estate, is worth reading in this context. See also *ibid.*, 7:797-98.

24. The remark is found right at the beginning of the tape on Rev. 13.

25. This general point was clearly expounded by Koresh in a talk that he gave in October 1989, an audio copy of which is in my possession. Koresh says on the tape that he has had various visions over the course of the past five years but that he has hardly mentioned them to anyone. He then says, with obvious emphasis in his voice, that the message he has to give is "strictly biblical" and is not taken from his visions. Koresh seems to have followed this through to the point that even his "new light" doctrine (i.e. that God had decided Koresh should father many children by the women of the community) was argued in the context of Old Testament polygamy.

26. *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines* (Washington, D.C.: Ministerial Association, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, 1988), 219-20.

27. See, for example, Richard Rice, *The Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology from a Seventh-day Adventist Perspective* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1985), 194-98.

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