

## BOOK REVIEWS

# What Killed the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists?

*The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* | A REVIEW BY DAVID R. LARSON

Leaving dead eighty or so Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, gigantic flames consumed Mount Carmel near Waco, Texas, as the whole world watched in televised horror on April 19, 1993. This book is about what went wrong. Exhaustively researched, thoroughly documented, and dispassionately written, it is an overwhelmingly positive contribution. Its author, Kenneth G. C. Newport, a meticulous scholar at Liverpool Hope University in England, deserves our gratitude and congratulations. Although I have some questions about his central thesis, at least as I understand it, he certainly has mine!

I suggest that advanced Sabbath School classes around the world purchase this book and discuss one of its seventeen chapters and four appendices each week. Few things can do more to help people in such groups to gain a clearer understanding of what it means to be a Seventh-day Adventist today and what it doesn't. I receive no commission from the publisher for saying this. I had to purchase my hard copy too!

As Newport recounts it, around 9:05 a.m. on Sunday, February 28, 1993, near Waco, Texas, agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms, an arm of the federal government of the United States, faced a difficult decision. Now that

#### For Further Reading

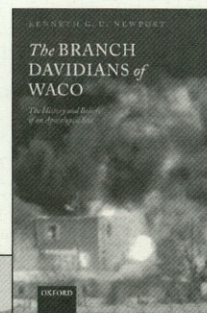
"Waco Revisited," by Richard Mouw, *Books and Culture*, March/April 2007. See also: "Adventism's Waco Connection Revisited: A Response to Richard Mouw," by David Larson, at <<http://progressiveadventism.com/2007/03/>>. Comments about Larson's response are at: <<http://progressiveadventism.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=58>>.

the Branch Davidians knew about their plans, should the agents continue? "Yes!" they agreed.

About forty minutes later, seventy-five or eighty of them in cattle trucks rumbled to a stop at Mount Carmel, a compound on less than one hundred acres of Texas ranchland. They carried with them three warrants relating to illegal weapons. One was to arrest David Koresh, the Branch Davidian leader; another was to search Mount Carmel; and a third was to inspect Mag Bag, a rented garage about four miles away, where the Branch Davidians earned money by fixing cars.

The armed ATF agents advanced. A gun

Kenneth G. C. Newport,  
**The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect.**  
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).



battle erupted. When it was over a couple hours later, David Koresh was wounded, struck by spraying bullets in his groin and right wrist. Four ATF agents and six Branch Davidians were either dead or about to die. The Federal Bureau of Investigation took charge.

For fifty-one days, the FBI tried to pressure the Branch Davidians into giving up. It cut off Mount Carmel's electricity; flooded the nights with powerful lights; broadcast the sounds of bagpipes, seagulls, and sirens; and blasted the recorded noise of crying babies, howling coyotes, and

**Above: Florence and Victor Houteff in 1946, and the former site of Mount Carmel in Waco, Texas.**



rabbits being strangled. The Branch Davidians stayed put.

About 6:00 a.m. on April 19, the FBI invaded Mount Carmel with helicopters, two Combat Engineer Vehicles ("tanks") and armed agents. "This is not an assault!" they bellowed. Its residents answered with blazing guns. About noon, fires broke out, set by the Branch Davidians themselves.

Most of the Branch Davidians who died succumbed to smoke inhalation, suffocation, or thermal burns. Gunshot wounds and blunt force trauma, which some Branch Davidians inflicted upon each other, finished off several. Someone stabbed to death a three-year-old boy. David Koresh died from a single bullet to his head, probably shot by Steven Schneider, his right-hand man. Schneider stuffed a gun into his mouth and pulled the trigger. His last known words were: "O God! Where are you?"

Exactly two years later to the day, Timothy McVeigh bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Building in Oklahoma City, a tall structure that provided offices for many employees of the federal government. Many adults and children died. McVeigh said that he killed these innocent people in part to avenge Waco's victims.

Newport does not place primary responsibility for what went wrong at Waco upon the ATF and FBI. Neither does he pinpoint as primarily culpable David Koresh as, to use his words, either "mad" (insane) or "bad" (wicked) or both. He believes that we should focus on what the Branch Davidians believed. Once we understand their premises and principles and how they used them, we will realize that what they did made much sense on their own terms, he contends.

Newport begins his account of these beliefs with the Bible because it frequently teaches that this age will end and that dramatic events will usher in the next. For the first Christians, this hope centered upon the triumphant return of Jesus Christ. In the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo subdued its intensity by applying much of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, to the church. This was the standard interpretation until the thirteenth century, when Joachim of Fiore began to teach that Revelation covers the whole of human history: past, present, and future. This interpretation prevailed among Protestants until the middle of the nineteenth century. The Seventh-day Adventist Church inherited this view and still teaches it.

According to Newport, Seventh-day Adventism unlocked several doctrinal doors through which the Davidians and Branch Davidians subsequently rushed. One of the most important was the typological method of interpreting Scripture that was once widespread among all Christians. It saw in biblical words and deeds omens ("types") that illuminate current and future events ("antitypes)." A second was the Seventh-day Adventist acceptance of Ellen G. White as a genuine messenger of God, a belief that leaves open the theoretical possibility of prophets in our time. A third was that, as God's true Remnant, Adventists would pass through a time of trouble before the end of the age. There were others as well.

Victor T. Houteff was born in 1885; he died in 1955. Over the course of his life, he emigrated from Bulgaria to the United States, became a successful business man, and married Florence Hermanson. He was baptized into the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Rockford, Illinois, in 1919. The Olympic Exposition Park Seventh-day Adventist Church in Los Angeles disfellowshipped him in 1930, but only after, according to his report, it tried to have him committed to an insane asylum. He published *The Shepherd's Rod*, a periodical, organized the "General Association of Davidian Seventh-Adventists," established his group's headquarters on 277 acres of land near Waco, Texas, that the group called Mount Carmel, and taught a number of things that differed from mainline Seventh-day Adventist thought.

One of these was that in the last days the ancient Kingdom of David would be restored literally in Jerusalem with a spiritual ruler (Jesus Christ) and a physical ruler (himself?). Another was that, at his invitation, as the modern Elijah and John the Baptist, a genuine Remnant of 144,000 Seventh-day Adventists, who had forsaken the denomination's apostate ways, would convene in Jerusalem and from there do God's work throughout the world. A third was that God would literally slaughter and leave in their blood all Seventh-day Adventists who did not accept his message. Yet another was that a "cleansing fire" would destroy all other wicked people and purify the Remnant. These teachings caused much tension between the Davidians and other Seventh-day Adventists.

Florence Houteff prevailed against several rivals for leadership following her husband's death. She predicted





**The old gate at Mount Carmel.**



**Ben and Lois Roden.**



**David Koresh.**

that on or about April 22, 1959, the date on which some anticipated the resurrection of her husband, the events leading to the establishment of the restored Kingdom of David in Jerusalem would commence. Along with her entire executive council, Florence resigned her leadership position on March 1, 1962. Further study had established that her deceased husband had been honestly mistaken, they explained in a written statement. All but 77 of Mount Carmel's 941 acres were sold.

Ben and Lois Roden were two of Houteff's followers. They had joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1940; however, they quickly became interested in Victor Houteff's teaching. In 1945, their Texas congregation disfellowshipped them. Ben angrily removed the church's doors and Lois camped for several days in the baptistery. They eventually become convinced that they should prepare for the restored Kingdom of David in Jerusalem, so they traveled back and forth between Israel and the

United States, visiting and staying at Mount Carmel when they could.

Meanwhile, Ben had begun to develop his own approach to things that he called "The Branch." On June 14, 1970, he was crowned "Vicegerent of the Most High God" at Mount Carmel, where things had not been flourishing since Florence Houteff's resignation. On February 27, 1973, Mount Carmel's remaining seventy-seven acres and buildings were sold to Benjamin Roden and Lois Roden, "Trustees for the General Association of Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists." Ben died on October 22, 1978, and was buried at Waco.

Although she had to rebuff challenges from their son, George, Lois Roden succeeded her husband as the leader at Mount Carmel. In the summer of 1981, a man in his early twenties wandered onto Mount Carmel. Lois noticed his abilities, instructed him in Branch Davidian thought, and agreed to have a continuing sexual relationship with him,

even though he was more than forty years younger. His name was Vernon Howell. He was to be known to the world as David Koresh.

After Lois Roden's death on November 10, 1986, open conflict for Mount Carmel erupted between her son, George Roden, and her protégé, David Koresh. Her protégé outmaneuvered her son in several skirmishes. George Roden died in 1998 in a mental institution. He had run for the presidency of the United States, called on God to plague a judge with herpes, and killed a man with an ax and then shot him and cut him into pieces.

David Koresh had been born on August 17, 1959, in Houston, Texas, to Bonnie Clark when she was fourteen or fifteen years old and not married to Bobby Howell, Koresh's biological father, who was about five years older. By the time he arrived at Mount Carmel in the summer of 1981, he had fathered the first of the sixteen or seventeen or so children, depending upon the reports, he would have with almost a dozen women.

He had also twice impregnated the pastor's daughter of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Tyler, Texas, which he had joined by baptism, in harmony with his mother's and grandmother's faith, in 1979. He was disfellowshipped from the congregation in 1981; however, by then he had spent much time with the Bible, and had memorized large portions of the New Testament. He eventually developed a keen interest in the Psalms and applied many of its themes to himself.

As his first name shows, David Koresh saw himself as a ruler of the Kingdom of David that was to be restored in Jerusalem. His last name indicates that he also thought of himself as playing in our time the role of ancient Cyrus, who would destroy contemporary Babylon, which he took to be the United States. He anticipated that he and his followers would be cleansed by total immersion in literal fire, after which they would be resurrected to exercise God's wrath on the wicked.

Koresh sometimes referred to himself as the "Son of God"; however, he seems not to have totally identified himself with Jesus Christ. He was able in time to convince the Branch Davidians that God commanded that only he should have sexual relationships with their women so that even those who were married should be sexually available only to him. Koresh was sexually active with other women as well, some of whom were very young.



**O**ne theme that threads its way throughout this book is that David Koresh "differed in degree and detail more than in kind from countless millions of his fellow Americans who, the statistics indicate, have 'no doubt' that Jesus will one day come to earth again." Although Newport discusses "innovations," "differences," "departures," "major departures," "different trajectories," and "uncharted waters" along the way, I take this to be his central thesis. Here are some questions:

1. Don't differences "in degree" often become differences "in kind"? Although water and ice differ "in degree," they differ "in kind" when we walk across a lake that may or may not be frozen. Points on a compass that are separated by ten intervals differ "in degree." Likewise, even if in the distant past they had started off as differences "in degree," by 1993 had not the doctrinal dissimilarities between David Koresh and all other North Americans who believed in the return of Jesus Christ become differences "in kind"?

2. Don't some of the departures that this book describes qualify as differences "in kind"? Consider, for example, Victor Houteff's prophecy that God would literally slaughter and leave in their own blood all Seventh-day Adventists who did not accept his message. The idea that the Remnant would be purified by baptism in the literal fire that would consume the wicked seems like a major doctrinal innovation.

What about the idea that the Remnant, not only God, would destroy the wicked? Then there is Koresh's "new light," which guaranteed him sole sexual access to the Branch Davidian women. The overwhelming majority of Adventists who heard these messages did not experience them as more intricate and thorough elaborations of their own beliefs. This is probably why no more than one thousand Seventh-day Adventists ever became Davidians and Branch Davidians, a recruiting rate of less than one percent.

3. Doesn't this book's thesis allow its author on occasion to massage the evidence? This book correctly reports that Adventists believe at least two things about the gift of prophecy: (1) It is not necessarily a thing of the past, and (2) No one should be accepted as a true messenger of God until he or she passes certain tests that Scripture provides. It does not give these equally important Seventh-day Adventist beliefs the same emphasis, however. It pays

more attention to the first because in principle it opens Adventism's doctrinal door to people like David Koresh.

Another book with equal justification could focus upon the second belief because in fact it closes these same doctrinal doors to people like Koresh. Neither of these interpretations is as true to the evidence as one that gives both beliefs the equal emphasis that they deserve.

4. Doesn't this thesis tempt us to place too much emphasis upon Koresh's beliefs? We need not be full-blown Marxists and Freudians to doubt that the best way to understand what people do is to study their beliefs. Material factors—relative differences in fame and fortune, for instance—count, too. Intense drives for sex and power also matter. Also, Koresh was a deeply wounded man psychologically, even if he was not certifiably insane. A different but related issue is that Newport would probably give the ATF and FBI a grade of "B" or better, whereas many others think that they deserve a grade of "D" or worse. Either way, these lawmen were very much a part of the problem.

5. Isn't this book's thesis at odds with itself? It argues that the beliefs of David Koresh and millions of other Christians who also believed in the second coming of Jesus differed "in degree" and not "in kind." Yet these other Christians never did what he did, and there is no evidence that they ever would. This means one or the other of two things. Either in all cases the relationships between belief and behavior are not as tight as this book presumes, or in this specific case there was a difference between what Koresh and the other Christians believed that was so gigantic that we might as well call it a difference "in kind."

I believe that lethal combinations of heresy, immorality, and insanity on both sides of the conflict killed the Branch Davidians. Koresh and his followers twisted Christian teachings about the future to their destruction; the ATF and FBI did something similar to the American ideals of liberty and justice for all. Koresh and his clan allowed his passions for power and pleasure to overcome him; the officers of the law permitted their embarrassment, impatience, and vindictiveness to cloud their better judgment. The Branch Davidians acted in ways that contradicted their own interests; so did the agents of the federal government. Things don't get much worse. ■

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