

BOOKS

The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect.
By Kenneth G. C. Newport. Oxford University Press, 2006. 379 pages.
\$49.95 cloth.

As the title of this book indicates, Kenneth G. C. Newport has not set out to evaluate the 1993 Waco crisis per se, but rather to provide an account of the history and beliefs of the group that culminated in the leadership of David Koresh and the disaster of 19 April 1993. That he does and does well. Although Koresh and his followers came to worldwide attention on 28 February 1993 as a result of the bungled raid by agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF), the movement and its history date back sixty years earlier, to the 1930s, when Victor Houteff broke with the Seventh-day Adventist Church and founded the General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. And further, as Newport clearly demonstrates, that sixty-year history can only be properly understood in the wider context of the type of “Prophecy Belief” that was deeply rooted in the Millerite/Adventist movement as a whole.

Newport has provided us with an extended, well-documented, analytical treatment of that sixty-year history, devoting half his book to Victor and Florence Houteff and their successors Ben and Lois Roden, who founded the General Association of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists in the 1960s. Victor Houteff (1885–1955), Ben Roden (1902–1978), and Lois Roden (d. 1986) were viewed by the Branch Davidians as prophets and bearers of “new light” or revelation. Newport rightly understands that unless one grasps the somewhat complex ways that this succession of leaders interpreted the Bible and its prophetic images, one has no basis for comprehending Koresh and his band of devoted followers who came into conflict with the federal government in 1993.

Vernon Howell (1959–1993), who changed his name to David Koresh in 1990, gradually assumed leadership of the group in the mid-1980s, and took the Branch Davidians in some new and more radical directions based on his evolving understanding of his own role as a prophet and

“Christ” figure. Newport skillfully takes the reader through the rather dense layers of Koresh’s evolving biblical and prophetic interpretations. Newport rightly emphasizes that the commitment of the group, so evident during the 1993 siege by the FBI, was not that of a group of disenfranchised misfits who had been brainwashed by Koresh, but was based on a highly complex and imaginative interpretation of biblical texts. Set in this context, Newport is able to show that Koresh himself was neither “mad” nor “bad,” in the simplistic ways he was portrayed by the media and the government. The stereotypes of “crazed cult leader” or “charismatic charlatan” do not shed much light on Koresh or the basis of the devotion he drew from his followers. Newport’s treatment provides a glimpse into this countercultural world and how it operated to provide meaning to its inhabitants as God’s chosen ones living in the “last days.”

Unfortunately, with all the merits Newport’s book offers, his treatment of the last days of the Branch Davidian standoff, culminating in the FBI tank and CS gas assault and the fire on 19 April 1993, is the weakest section of the book. He concludes that Koresh had determined early on that he and his followers were to be martyred, that he had no intention of exiting the property, and that the fire was started by the Branch Davidians at Koresh’s orders. Whether Newport is right or wrong about the cause of the fire, in his rush to present that evidence, to which he devotes two entire chapters, he entirely misses the significance of the last two weeks of the siege, devoting only three pages to this important period and its breakthrough developments (pp. 272–74). He ignores the critical importance of attorney Dick DeGuerin’s face-to-face meetings with Koresh (29 March through 4 April), in consultation with biblical scholars J. Phillip Arnold and James Tabor, in which a specific surrender and exit plan was worked out. He misses the significance of Koresh’s 14 April letter saying that the Branch Davidians would come out after he wrote his “little book” interpreting the Seven Seals of the book of Revelation, why it was sent the day after Passover, and the vital importance, in Koresh’s mind, of writing his manuscript and having it published and presented to theologians and biblical scholars. Newport fails to take up the content of the surviving portion of that manuscript completed a few days before the fire, and what it says about Koresh’s understanding of his situation that last week. Newport also says nothing about the back-and-forth deliberations between FBI officials and Attorney General Janet Reno the weekend before the fire, in which Reno repeatedly asked if there was any argument for waiting but was never told about Koresh’s exit plan. Amazingly, Newport writes that the negotiation tapes over the last days of the siege “do not contain much that could be considered evidence of a willingness to leave Mt. Carmel on Koresh’s part . . .” (p. 272). Yet Koresh and his main confidant, Steve Schneider, rehearse and discuss in detail the surrender plan that had been worked out with the lawyers and the biblical scholars as late as

the Saturday before the Monday fire. There is a world of difference between Koresh's understanding of his situation on 14 April and 19 April. Koresh makes this explicit in his last recorded words with an FBI negotiator on 18 April, when the FBI tanks were clearing vehicles from the front of the building in preparation for Monday's operation. Unfortunately the FBI unwittingly delivered to the community the Armageddon it expected to occur, not at their Mount Carmel Center in 1993, but in Jerusalem in the years ahead.

It is unfortunate that Newport fails to apply the considerable skills he developed in understanding Koresh's biblical/prophetic world to this critical juncture of the siege. He makes the mistake of allowing his conclusion that the Branch Davidians set the fire on 19 April, to be read back into the complex of events in the last two weeks of the siege that had every promise of delivering a peaceful end to the crisis.

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