



## David Koresh and the Branch Davidians

**Author:** Sarah Harvey

**Published:** 15th January 2021

Sarah Harvey. "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from [www.cdamm.org/articles/koresh-davidians](http://www.cdamm.org/articles/koresh-davidians). (First published 12 June 2017, [censamm.org/resources/profiles/the-branch-davidians](http://censamm.org/resources/profiles/the-branch-davidians).)

### Introduction

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The Branch Davidians are an indirect splinter group of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA) whose members believe in the imminent return of Jesus and that living [prophets](#) can interpret God's Word in the Bible. The Branch Davidians trace their roots to the work of Victor Houteff (1885–1955), who claimed unique insights into the Book of Revelation, and who founded the General Association of the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. In 1935, Houteff established the Mount Carmel Center in Waco, Texas. This property was sold by the group after his death and a new property purchased outside of the city of Waco and also named Mount Carmel. The General Association of Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists was founded by Benjamin Roden (1902–1978), a follower of Houteff, after Houteff's death in 1955. David Koresh (then called Vernon Howell) (1959–1993) joined the Branch Davidians in 1981, becoming leader of the core group of Branch Davidians by 1984. Koresh claimed to be the son of God, the Christ for the Last Days and the Lamb of Revelation.

David Koresh and the Branch Davidians are now synonymous with the events that unfolded at the Mount Carmel Center between February and April 1993. On 28 February, a raid by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) led to the deaths of six Branch Davidians and four ATF agents. There then followed a 51-day siege and the eventual assault of the residence by the FBI on 19 April. The tank and CS gas assault culminated in a fire in which 76 Branch Davidian members died: 53 adults and 23 children.

### History/Origins

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The history of the Branch Davidians is one of theological disputes and contested leaderships. The leaders of the movement have claimed to receive divine revelations about their own status and about the return of Christ.

The origins of the movement can be traced to the 19th century and to the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church led by James and Ellen White. Victor Houteff (1885–1955), a Bulgarian immigrant to the USA, joined

the SDA Church in 1919. However, in the late 1920s, he began to preach his own message, believing that the SDA Church had become pervaded by 'worldly' influences. He claimed that SDA members were not the 144,000 faithful mentioned in Revelation 7 who would be delivered at the imminent second coming of Christ. Rather, he preached that he could purify the Church, gather the 144,000 faithful and lead them to Israel where they would meet Christ on his return. He published his ideas in a tract called, *The Shepherd's Rod*. Houteff was excommunicated from the SDA Church in 1934. In 1935, he purchased land in Waco, Texas and established the Mount Carmel Center community. In 1943, his group was incorporated with the name, 'The General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists'. By the time of Houteff's death in 1955, there were around 100 members living in the community, which included a school and a home for the elderly.

Victor Houteff was succeeded by his widow, Florence Houteff. Florence sold the Mount Carmel Center property and purchased a new parcel of land, outside of Waco, called New Mount Carmel Center (but usually referred to simply as Mount Carmel). Florence predicted, based on her interpretation of Victor's teachings, that God would 'violently chastise the Seventh-day Adventists who did not accept the Davidian message, and then Davidians would be relocated miraculously to God's kingdom in the Holy Land' (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 200). She predicted that this would occur 'on or about' 22 April 1959. Following this [prophecy](#), membership increased and around 1000 members gathered at New Mount Carmel. Her prophecy failed to be fulfilled and Florence moved to California. In 1961 some Davidians left Mount Carmel and relocated to California, and in 1970 to Salem, South Carolina where they remained faithful to Victor Houteff's teachings (Gallagher 2013b). In 1962, Florence and the other six members of the Executive Council resigned, followed by the dissolution of the original General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. Some of the Davidians who remained at Mount Carmel eventually became Branch Davidians following Ben Roden (Newport 2006, 107-11).

After Victor Houteff's death in 1955, one of his followers, Benjamin (Ben) Roden (1902-1978), claimed that he was the rightful leader of the Davidians. Roden took the title 'Branch' based on a passage in Isaiah ('and a branch shall grow out of his roots'). He established the organisation 'The General Association of the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists' and his followers became known as the 'Branch Davidians'. Roden claimed that he was chosen by God to complete Victor Houteff's work. However, in the late 1950s, whilst Florence led the group at New Mount Carmel, Ben and his wife Lois (1905-1986), set up headquarters in Odessa, Texas. They also travelled to Israel to establish a community there.

After Florence left New Mount Carmel and resigned her leadership position, Ben Roden began a legal case to acquire the property. Legal battles over ownership of the New Mount Carmel Center between rival Davidian factions continued through the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ben Roden and the General Association of Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventists completed the purchase in 1973 (Gallagher 2013b).

Ben Roden led the group until his death in 1978. He was succeeded by his wife Lois Roden. In 1977, Lois had a vision in which she saw that the Holy Spirit is the feminine aspect of God. She began to teach this vision and was accepted by the Branch Davidians as having received divine inspiration to interpret the Bible's [prophecies](#) about the End Days. However, their eldest son, George Roden (1938-1998), disputed his mother's succession. In 1979, Lois obtained a court order that George could not be on the property (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 52-53). In 1980, Lois began publication of a journal, *SHEkinah*

which, through the reprinting of newspaper articles and essays by feminist theologians, supported her views on 'the feminine nature of God and the legitimacy of women's religious leadership' (Pitts 2014, 37).

David Koresh (then Vernon Howell, 1959-1993) became a member of the Branch Davidians in 1981. He had been dismissed from the SDA Church due to his attempts to preach his own version of SDA theology. Lois recognised Koresh as her successor in 1983. However, there was contention as Koresh refused to publish the last edition of *SHEkinah*. When Lois went ahead and published it anyway, this 'disobedience marked the demise of her charismatic authority' and the loss of her 'Spirit of Prophecy' in the eyes of the Branch Davidians, who believed that the Spirit of Prophecy had relocated to Vernon Howell (Pitts 2014, 49).

Koresh faced a series of leadership battles with George Roden, son of Ben and Lois. George Roden sought to gain leadership and control of Mount Carmel - which he did for a time in the mid-1980s. In 1984, Koresh and his followers left Mount Carmel and relocated first in Waco, and then Palestine, Texas, due to fears of violence from George Roden. Koresh travelled during this time, visiting Israel and proselytising in various cities in America and in England and Australia. In 1987, Koresh and his male followers were involved in a gun fight with George Roden at Mount Carmel. The participants were arrested. However, the trial resulted in a hung jury as far as Koresh was concerned and the other men were acquitted (Wessinger 2016). George Roden was imprisoned in 1988 on an unrelated charge. The Branch Davidians then returned to Mount Carmel, from where Koresh led the group, continuing to [prophesise](#) and deliver revelations about his own (and his followers') role in establishing the Kingdom of God on earth.

In 1993, there were just over 120 members living at Mount Carmel. The majority were American (84); 31 were British, five were Australian, two from Canada and one from Israel. However, they were a multiracial community with many members of mixed ethnicities. Forty-three members were women, 37 men and 44 children under 18 - 30 of whom were eight or younger; 12 of the children were Koresh's own (Wessinger 2017, 209). Over half of the members (76 in total), including Koresh, were killed in the fire following the FBI tank and CS gas assault on Mount Carmel on 19 April 1993.

In 1999, member Clive Doyle (one of nine members to survive the fire) returned to live at Mount Carmel where supporters constructed a new chapel and visitor centre. He remained there until 2006, after which the property was taken over by Charles Pace, who rejects Koresh as [prophet](#) and messiah. Another member to survive the fire, Renos Avraam, leads another rival group, although the number of followers of either Pace or Avraam is negligible. There are other groups and individuals who claim to continue the teachings of the Branch Davidians and/or David Koresh - there is no single 'official' group. Some of these claim their own unique and definitive interpretations of the Book of Revelation.

## Beliefs

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The Branch Davidians are members of a millennial Christian tradition with a focus on the coming of Christ in the Last Days. Influenced by the writings of James and Ellen White and the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, the Branch Davidians taught that [prophetic](#) guidance did not end with the apostles but is available as 'Present Truth' or 'New Light' in each generation (Gallagher 2013, 115). Branch Davidian

leaders have, hence, produced new interpretations of biblical texts, in particular the Book of Revelation. They have also made claims about their own roles in the End Times. Ben Roden claimed to be the antitypical Joshua and King David (Newport 2006, 137), whilst David Koresh claimed to be the Lamb of Revelation and the Christ for the Last Days.

Catherine Wessinger, Professor of Religious Studies at Loyola University New Orleans, notes that Koresh did not claim to be a reincarnation of Jesus Christ (2017, 209). The Branch Davidians had a unique understanding of the Trinity. Under Lois Roden's leadership, the Trinity was called the Family: Father, Mother (termed variously Spirit, Shekinah and Wisdom) and Son. Koresh rather taught that 'God is One made up of two halves: the Father figure and the Mother figure' (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 77). God is Spirit who sometimes chooses to manifest in flesh in order to experience his creation. Koresh taught that Jesus Christ, or Yahshua, 'was the Father who had taken on flesh' (ibid, 77). When Jesus ascended to Heaven, he became the Father again, not a separate entity. Koresh also claimed that the Father had taken on flesh at other times in history including in the time of Abraham (ibid, 78). Hence to speak of a 'Second Coming' was incorrect, he taught. Koresh's followers came to believe that Koresh was more than a [prophet](#). Doyle states, 'We came to believe that he was the manifestation of God or the Messiah figure predicted for the Last Days' (ibid, 80).

Koresh claimed that this status gave him a unique insight into Revelation and the Bible as a whole (the King James Version). In this claim, Koresh intended his interpretation of Revelation to be the final and definitive understanding. However, since 1993, numerous groups and individuals in this lineage, including survivor Renos Avraam (who calls himself the 'Chosen Vessel'), have continued to interpret Revelation and to claim a messianic status.

Member Livingstone Fagan (who left Mount Carmel during the siege) explains:

*The need for new religious movements often arises because the established order has gone off track...This is partly why our community at Waco came into being. We were raised up by God as were the prophets in times past to deliver a message. I don't say this lightly, the prophecies also confirm this (2013, 198).*

## Millennial Beliefs

In line with the Seventh-day Adventist tradition, Davidian and Branch Davidian theology focuses on seeking to understand Biblical messages about the imminent Last Days and the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth. Davidian and Branch Davidian leaders have focused on interpreting the Book of Revelation, creating a long line of revelations and [prophecies](#). These include Victor Houteff's claim to be able to purify the SDA Church and gather the 144,000 faithful to meet Christ at his return; Ben Roden's claim to be appointed by God to complete Victor Houteff's work; and Lois Roden's visionary claims, including that the Holy Spirit is the feminine aspect of God.

David Koresh also claimed visionary experiences. He reported to have experienced a vision when in Israel

in 1985. He claimed that he had visited Heaven, was acknowledged by God as his Son, and given the ability to see the true meaning of the Bible. In 1990, Koresh (born Vernon Wayne Howell) filed a legal petition to change his name to David Koresh. In this, he identified with David, the first king of ancient Israel, and with King Cyrus of Persia (Koresh is Hebrew for Cyrus). Through the name change, Koresh sought to demonstrate his status as the leader of a new Israel and the Christ for the Last Days. He also identified himself as the seventh angel of Revelation, in a line of previous [prophets](#): William Miller of the nineteenth-century Millerite movement in America (who was both the first and second angel), Ellen G. White, Victor Houteff, Benjamin Roden and Lois Roden.

Based on his visionary experience, Koresh claimed that he was the Lamb of Revelation – the only person who could unlock the Seven Seals of Revelation. In Revelation 6, the Lamb takes a book sealed with seven seals out of the hand of the One on the throne (who is Christ in Koresh's interpretation) and opens it. In the future Kingdom, the Lamb will be married. This will create a quartet of Father, Mother, Son (the Spirit in the flesh – Christ/the Lamb) and his wife or perfect mate (who is also an extension of the Spirit) (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 81, 89).

Central to Branch Davidian millennial beliefs is the concept of the 'wave sheaf'. The wave sheaf was the first and best stalks of barley harvested and dedicated to God at Passover, before the remainder of the harvest could be collected. In Branch Davidian theology, the wave sheaf is 'that group in every generation who were first to acknowledge God's instructions and obey God, sometimes at the cost of their lives' (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 84). The rest of the harvest are the other souls who will be saved. When Christ was resurrected, according to Branch Davidian theology, so too was the wave sheaf of that time – those who had been martyred and experienced 'baptisms of fire'. They were resurrected to acknowledge Christ and were taken to Heaven (ibid, 85).

The rest of the wave sheaf – those who have died for God since the resurrection of Christ – are still to be resurrected. This wave sheaf includes David Koresh who taught that he would be martyred in a conflict with government agents (Wessinger 2016). It also includes the Branch Davidians and other martyrs who have 'followed the most present truth', including those still alive: 200 million people in total (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 85). Judgement will start when the Lamb and the rest of the wave sheaf is resurrected. The Lamb, his children (identified with the 24 elders in Revelation) and the wave sheaf will judge the world. The 200 million people are 'part of the army of the Lamb sent to kill a third part of mankind in judgement (Revelation 9:14-21)' (ibid, 93). Those who will be included in Christ's earthly Kingdom in the Holy Land are scattered across countries and religions – Branch Davidians do not believe that only Christians can be saved.

The wave sheaf will attend the wedding of the Lamb and his bride in heaven. After the wedding, the wave sheaf will "sing a new song" (Revelation 5:8-10, 14:2-3) to the 144,000 who stand on Mount Zion with the Lamb (Christ), thus delivering Christ's message to them' (Wessinger 2016). The 144,000 are believed to be the 'selected representatives from the twelve tribes' (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 89). They will then gather in the rest of the harvest, the saved souls. The saved will attend the marriage supper of the Lamb which will take place in God's Kingdom on earth. They will not go to heaven – or rather, when the Kingdom is established 'heaven will descend to earth' (ibid, 95).

In Branch Davidian eschatology, the 'two-horned beast' or 'lamblike beast' of Revelation is the United

States of America (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 92). The United States is the primary player in the United Nations – termed ‘the Assyrian’. In the Branch Davidian interpretation of the End-times, the Assyrian will enter the Holy Land in the Last Days and interfere in God’s plans for Jerusalem. God will deal with the Assyrian and everyone not willing to acknowledge God will flee the Holy Land. The Lord will then establish his Kingdom on earth – with the 144,000 people with him at Mount Zion mentioned above. But it is then that Babylon the Great will be established. Babylon the Great is believed to be the coalition of nations, the one-world government, which is put together by the Assyrian and the two-horned beast. Babylon will persecute God’s people, but God will provide a refuge for them. Eventually Babylon will fall. God will cast the two-horned beast into the lake of fire and then, much later, after the millennium, the devil also (ibid, 97). After the millennium, the Kingdom of God will never be destroyed (Wessinger 2016).

The battle of [Armageddon](#) is not discussed much in Branch Davidian theology, according to Doyle, as it is ‘way down at the end of Judgment’ (2012, 97). Whilst the commencement of the Last Days is believed to be imminent, Armageddon itself is much further off in the future. The Seven Seals of Revelation, in Branch Davidian interpretation, focus on the events leading up to Armageddon. Koresh interpreted the Fifth Seal to suggest that he and the Branch Davidians would be attacked by government forces twice. This event was believed to be imminent. The initial raid by ATF agents on the community confirmed this for members, and they were waiting to see if the FBI agents would attack them. However, theirs was a fluid understanding of the End Times, looking to current events for confirmation of their understanding of the Bible’s [prophecies](#) (Gallagher 2000).

Branch Davidian beliefs in a ‘baptism of fire’ are also significant in their End-times theology. Victor Houteff, and then the Rodens, taught that members would one day experience a purification through a baptism of fire (Newport 2006, 308–14). Lois Roden taught that members living at Mount Carmel would experience a baptism of fire ‘by full immersion’ as a gateway into the Kingdom (Newport 2006, 314, Wessinger 2016). Wessinger points out that the choice of the name Mount Carmel references fire as it was the place in the Holy Land where Elijah prayed to God to light a fire to consume his sacrifice (2016). The sacrality of the Mount Carmel Center is also significant. According to Doyle, ‘We believed that our property, Mount Carmel, was a place that God provided in the wilderness outside of the Holy Land’ (2012, 68). Mount Carmel was considered both a ‘training ground and haven’. It was ‘a place that prepared people to be able to go to Israel’ (ibid, 68). Koresh’s continued teaching of a baptism of fire, his ‘apocalyptic theology of martyrdom’ (Wessinger 2017, 217) and the sacrality of Mount Carmel all undoubtedly played a role in the final events of the community.

During the siege, Branch Davidians believed themselves to be following God’s orders. They believed they were first to wait, then to see if by some means they would be taken to heaven during Passover week. When nothing happened during Passover, Koresh devised a plan by which he would write down his interpretation of the Seven Seals and then come out to be taken into custody. During the siege, biblical scholars James D. Tabor and J. Phillip Arnold attempted to counsel the FBI that Koresh might surrender if his theological emphasis on the Bible’s [prophecies](#) was taken seriously. Koresh’s letter written to his lawyer, Dick DeGuerin, on 14 April 1993, stated that he would come out of the residence once his manuscript was complete, and he also sent out a signed contract to retain this lawyer (Wessinger 2017, 221):

*I am presently being permitted to document, in structured form, the decoded messages of the Seven Seals. Upon completion of this task, I will be free of my 'waiting period.' I hope to finish this as soon as possible and to stand before man to answer any and all questions regarding my actions....*

I want the people of this generation to be saved. I am working night and day to complete my final work of the writing out of these Seals...

As soon as I can see that people like Jim Tabor and Phil Arnold have a copy I will come out and then you can do your thing with this beast. (Tabor and Gallagher 1995, 15)

## Practices

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Branch Davidian practices are in line with the wider Seventh-day Adventist Church including observation of the Saturday Sabbath and some dietary restrictions, including abstinence from pork. Ben Roden, who was Jewish, instituted the observance of the Jewish festivals including Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, into Branch Davidian practice.

Palestine/Israel has featured prominently in the teachings of successive leaders as the site of God's kingdom. When Houteff established the Mount Carmel Center it was in the belief that this was to be a temporary residence before the group moved to Palestine/Israel. Benjamin and Lois Roden also founded a community in Israel in 1958. It was in Israel that Koresh reported having his defining visionary experience.

Evangelism was another important practice: Victor Houteff focused on spreading his message amongst Seventh-day Adventist members, mailing his tracts to more than 100,000 SDA members and sending missionaries to visit SDA churches in England and Commonwealth countries (Wessinger 2000, 86). Later leaders sought to evangelise outside of the SDA Church, and Koresh and other members travelled throughout the USA and to England, Canada, Australia and Israel. The evangelism message focused on the leader's interpretations of Revelation.

In line with this, a major practice at Mount Carmel was Bible study. Under Koresh's leadership, there were daily teachings in which Koresh outlined his understandings of the Bible. Member Clive Doyle explains that some of these teachings took the form of Koresh narrating his visions as he was experiencing them (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 119). Music was also important during Koresh's leadership and Koresh expressed his theology in his songs.

Audio files of Koresh's songs have been uploaded to YouTube in recent years. For instance, his song, Book of Daniel:

*VoiceOffirePodcast, published 27 October 2011.*

During Koresh's leadership, the majority of members lived at the Mount Carmel Center from where they operated a number of businesses including a car repair service and the selling of gun and hunting-related products at gun shows. These businesses, as well as the donations of working Branch Davidians, financed the community. In the years prior to the raid, as members began to believe that an attack could be imminent, they began to practice a form of [survivalism](#), stockpiling dried food and weapons for use in self-defence.

## Controversies

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For the majority of its history, the Branch Davidians were a small, insular community which did not engage in problematic practices or attract much controversy. However, a number of Koresh's teachings and revelations were problematic. The most controversial practices were Koresh's sexual relations with underage female members, and the alleged conversion of semi-automatic weapons to fully-automatic.

Scholars including Stuart A. Wright and Susan Palmer (2016) and Catherine Wessinger (2000), have argued that it was only in the two years prior to the raid that the concerted effort of critics of the movement (including ex-members, relatives and journalists) led to its public construction as a 'dangerous cult'. This image was exacerbated in the *Waco Tribune-Herald* series, 'The Sinful Messiah', which was published in instalments during the raid.

In the years leading up to the raid, claims of child and sexual abuse were levelled at Koresh and the community by former members and critical relatives. Koresh did engage in sexual relations with a number of minors. In 1984 he had married his wife, Rachel Jones, when she was 14, with the permission of her parents who were longstanding members. This was legal practice in Texas at the time - the legal age of marriage with parental permission was raised to 16 in 2005. In 2017 the age was raised to 18.

In 1986, Koresh claimed a divine mandate to take other spiritual wives from among the young women and girls within the community. In 1989 he began to teach that all women in the community, including those married to others, were his wives; all the men, other than himself, were to be celibate (Wessinger 2016). Koresh taught the Branch Davidians that he was to father 24 children. These children would be raised within the community and would 'eventually serve as the 24 elders spoken of in the Book of Revelation who would rule during the Millennium' (Wright and Palmer 2016, 104).

Amongst his spiritual wives was Michele Jones, sister of Rachel, who was 12 at the time, below the age of legal consent in Texas. Another girl, Kiri Jewell, alleged that Koresh sexually molested her when she was 10 (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 213 n16). Many of the women believed that it was an honour to have a child with Koresh and parents consented to their young daughters entering the extra-legal marriages. By 1993, Koresh had fathered 17 children by eight different women.

*A home video of Koresh introducing his children, made during the siege and broadcast by CNN*

In 1992, following two child custody cases, the Texas Child Protective Services investigated alleged claims of child abuse at Mount Carmel. Former members reported a number of cases of Koresh spanking young

children and babies, including his son, Cyrus. However, after visiting Mount Carmel on three occasions to interview members, both adults and children, and to physically examine 12 children, no evidence of abuse was found, and the investigation was dropped. It is likely that some corporal punishment of children at Mount Carmel did take place, however, in line with conservative Protestant child-discipline practices (Wessinger 2000, 63).

The Branch Davidians did own guns, as was normal in the Texas culture in which they participated. Koresh and other members were also involved in the legal selling of guns. It is contested as to whether there was evidence that members were illegally converting semi-automatic weapons into fully-automatic weapons, without filing the appropriate paperwork and paying the required fee, as the ATF claimed (Kopel and Blackman 1997, Wessinger 2000, 62).

## February–April 1993

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On 28 February 1993, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), staged an attempted 'dynamic entry' on the residence in order to serve search and arrest warrants on David Koresh. The ATF acted on the assumption that Koresh was in possession of illegal weapons and explosives. After a gun battle in which four ATF agents and six Branch Davidians were killed and Koresh was injured, the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team was called in to take control of the stand-off.

Over the next 50 days, the FBI negotiated with Branch Davidian members in an attempt to have them surrender, whilst subjecting the community to both physical and psychological violence, including shining bright lights and playing loud recordings. Koresh and other members attempted to negotiate with the FBI through an explanation of their theology. FBI negotiators did not want to engage with the Branch Davidians' 'Bible babble' (Noesner 2013). Nevertheless, FBI negotiators and profilers paid attention to Koresh's theology to the extent that they were aware of the Branch Davidian apocalyptic theology of martyrdom and advised FBI officials that a mass 'suicide by cop' scenario could result from such aggressive actions on the part of the FBI (Wessinger 2017, 207, 212). They realised that the Branch Davidians 'expected to die in a fire if the community was assaulted a second time' (Wessinger 2009, 47). Wessinger describes the conflict amongst FBI officials as to the best course of action during the stand-off. She states that FBI decision makers ignored the advice of the FBI's own behavioural scientists (2017, 216). However, decision makers pressed ahead with seeking authorization from US Attorney General Janet Reno to launch a CS gas and tank assault. Wessinger states that 'Reno was not provided all of the available information about Koresh and the Branch Davidians' (2017, 223). The adverse effects of using CS gas in confined spaces was downplayed (Wessinger 2009, 40).

At 6am on the 19 April 1993, the 51<sup>st</sup> day of the siege, the FBI launched the assault on the barricaded community. The mothers and children ages thirteen and younger, and two pregnant women, sought shelter in a former concrete vault in the building. The former vault had an open doorway, because it was being used as a pantry and storeroom (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 3–4, 112–13, 123, 149). At 11:31am a tank drove through the building and sprayed CS gas toward the vault's open door until 11:55am (Doyle with Wessinger and Wittmer 2012, 228 n110; Wessinger 2009, 40–41Photo2; Wessinger 2017, 234–35). The Branch Davidians had no child-sized gas masks. The women and children all died. The

Danforth Final Report (2000, Appendix III-1C) lists the causes of death for the children in the vault as resulting from smoke inhalation and thermal burns; blunt injuries; one stab wound to the chest; four by gunshot wounds; and twelve with undetermined causes of death. Shortly after their deaths, just after midday when the boom of the same tank had penetrated a second-floor window to spray CS gas, fire began to spread through the building. The majority of survivors left in the residence at this point were killed in the fire. The Danforth Final Report states that at least 20 Davidians died from gunshot wounds which may have been self-inflicted or mercy killings. This includes David Koresh and prominent member, Steve Schneider, according to Newport (2006, 317). Thirty-five members (21 children and 14 adults) had left the residence during the siege and nine members survived the fire (Wessinger 2017, 212, 236). Eleven members were tried in 1994 on various charges including conspiracy, murder and weapons charges. Three defendants were found not guilty on all charges. Whilst all were cleared of the conspiracy and murder accusations, seven were found guilty of 'aiding and abetting in the voluntary manslaughter of federal officials' (Reavis 1995, 296) and seven of arms violations. The eight defendants were sentenced to between five and forty years (Reavis 1995, 299) but all had been released by the mid-2000s.

A short *National Geographic* report on the ATF raid, sympathetic to the ATF's perspective, can be seen below.

The report includes footage of Bible studies in Mount Carmel prior to the raid.

CNN's live coverage of the fire on 19 April 1993 can be seen below:

This includes a live interview with a Branch Davidian member, Brad Branch, who had left the residence earlier in the siege and was in prison, who claims that the fire was destroying evidence.

Wessinger has written that 'Every act of violence in the Branch Davidian case is disputed. The testimonies of Branch Davidians and U.S. federal agents contradict each other' (2000, 57). This is compounded by the fact that most of the evidence was destroyed in the final fire and the crime scene was demolished by FBI agents. The origin of the fire has been much contested. The FBI agents claimed that the Branch Davidians started the fires themselves in an act of suicide. Branch Davidian survivors denied this, stating that tanks had knocked over bottles of kerosene (Wessinger 2016). In 1999, it came to light that the FBI did fire pyrotechnic tear gas rounds on 19 April 1993 (which they had previously denied). It prompted Attorney General Reno to appoint former U.S. Senator John Danforth as the head of an independent inquiry into the siege and subsequent deaths. The Danforth Final Report, published in 2000, concluded that the FBI was not responsible for the deaths, the pyrotechnic ferret rounds shot early in the morning did not start the fire just after noon, and that responsibility lay with Koresh. Kenneth Newport's *The Branch Davidians of Waco* (2006) claimed that the Branch Davidians' death by fire was inevitable due to their theology. He describes the fire as 'the ultimate act of faith' (2006, chapter 14), and writes that 'it is quite possible, perhaps even probable, that the Branch Davidians were never planning to come out' (2006, 278). Wessinger claims that this analysis exonerates the FBI of responsibility for the deaths (2009, 27). Wessinger and other scholars, including Stuart A. Wright and Susan Palmer (2016) and Eugene V. Gallagher (2000) instead have focused on the interaction of the FBI and the Branch Davidians in creating the circumstances which lead to violence (Wessinger 2009, 27).

Stuart A. Wright and Susan Palmer suggest that concerted opposition to the movement by ex-members, concerned relatives, anti-cult activists and journalists coalesced in the two years prior to the raid as part of a 'deviance amplification spiral' (2016, 106) similar to that at [Jonestown](#). Indeed, concerned relatives had expressed fears that 'It'll be another Jonestown' (Wright and Palmer 2016, 107).

Koresh was involved in some illegal practices (particularly his sexual activity with minors). However, the presentation of the Branch Davidians outside the group led to a moral panic of concerned parties, 'threat escalation' (Wright and Palmer 2016, 106) and an assault on the community. Wright and Palmer argue that the ATF began preparing for a military-style raid months before it took place, based partly on ex-member testimonies that Koresh was stockpiling weapons and would never surrender in a conflict with the government. According to Wright and Palmer, the raid was flawed from the beginning: the ATF did not accept Koresh's invitation to Mount Carmel to inspect the weapons, and there were numerous opportunities to arrest Koresh when he was away from Mount Carmel. Wessinger writes that it is accepted in government reports that the ATF dynamic entry was executed partly to 'generate good publicity to justify the ATF's continued existence and obtain funding' (2009, 29).

*The Davidians were strategically framed by opponents as a violent apocalyptic cult holed up in an armed encampment preparing for the final battle of Armageddon against the Antichrist government forces. (Wright and Palmer 2016, 116).*

Professor Nancy Ammerman, who was asked by the Justice Department to review the FBI's interactions with the Branch Davidians, in 1995 wrote:

*After the disastrous BATF raid on the home of the Branch Davidians, as the FBI settled into their long siege and the world's news organizations created a small village outside the perimeter, scholars of religion—with near unanimity—shook their collective heads in disbelief at the strategies being adopted by federal law enforcement. Did they not know that a group was more likely to rally behind its charismatic leader than to surrender to his enemies? Did they not know that apocalyptic beliefs should be taken seriously, that they were playing the role of the enemies of Christ?*

Ammerman (1995) details how the statements of critics, including ex-members and 'anti-cultist' Rick Ross, encouraged the ATF and FBI to believe that the members would commit mass suicide, as in Jonestown, and/or were planning a war against the government. Government forces erroneously thought that the Branch Davidians had links with Christian Identity/ Posse Comitatus groups (Wright and Palmer 2016, 116). (An 11-day siege between the Weaver family and the FBI at Ruby Ridge in 1992 had ended in three deaths).

Eugene V. Gallagher (2000, and with James D. Tabor 1995), and Catherine Wessinger (2009, 2017) have argued that the Branch Davidian deaths in the fire at Mount Carmel were not inevitable. They suggest that the Branch Davidians were seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflict, with Koresh focusing on writing his interpretation of the Seven Seals. Whilst the belief in a baptism of fire was central, this was not necessarily considered to be imminent—it was dependent on the actions of the FBI agents. Wessinger writes that

whilst the Branch Davidians were prepared for an imminent attack on their community, in line with Koresh's interpretation of biblical [prophecies](#), they hoped that the community's final demise would be in the future—even after the siege and assault began (2009, 28). There was a 'strong instinct for physical survival inside the residence' she writes (*ibid.*). However, she argues—based on analysis of the FBI documents, negotiation tapes and survivor testimonies—that after the direct gassing of the women and children in the vault by a tank, Branch Davidian members might have set the fires which destroyed the building. She argues that 'federal agents knowingly applied pressure to provoke some Branch Davidians to set the fire and commit murder and suicide' (2009, 29). Hence it was the interaction of the FBI agents' violent actions with the group's theology of apocalyptic martyrdom - including their interpretation of the American government as the two-horned beast of revelation - which led to the final fire. In the final moments of the siege, the Branch Davidians may have become a 'fragile millennial group', engaging in violence in order to 'preserve the ultimate concern of remaining faithful to God's prophecies as they understood them' (2009, 50).

*The Branch Davidians would not have regarded their actions as a mass suicide, but instead as choosing martyrdom in resistance to the aggression of agents aligned with Satan, and in obedience to God's prophecies revealed in the Bible. (Wessinger 2009, 47)*

On the 19 April 1995, the second anniversary of the siege of Waco, Timothy McVeigh, a young Gulf War veteran, detonated a bomb outside a government building in Oklahoma City. 168 people died, including over a dozen children, and over 600 more were injured, making this the greatest loss of life in a US domestic terrorist incident. McVeigh cited both the Ruby Ridge deaths and the Waco siege as motivating factors in his antagonism towards the US federal government. In the documentary, [The Shadow of Waco](#) (2015), Mark Potok, Senior Fellow at the Southern Poverty Law Center, explains that 'On the far right in this country, Waco was the convincing last straw that government had in fact become a murderous tyranny'. It mobilised the far-right belief that citizen disarmament was coming, and led to an increase in armed militias, with around 450 across the country in 1995, according to the documentary. Following the Oklahoma City bombing militia activity diminished. However, there was a resurgence after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008/9, with the 2014 and 2016 stand-offs between the Bundy family and the government as recent examples.

The impact of Waco on contemporary militias is explored in the 15-minute RetroReport documentary, [The Shadow of Waco](#).

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The FBI files relating to Waco, including transcripts of the almost 250 negotiation tapes, can be accessed at <https://vault.fbi.gov/waco-branch-davidian-compound>

1993 US Department of Justice Report, 'Evaluation of the Handling of the Branch Davidian Stand-off in Waco, Texas: February 28 to April 19, 1993' by Edward S. G. Dennis, Jr. Available at <https://www.justice.gov/publications/waco/evaluation-handling-branch-davidian-stand-waco-texas-february-28-april-19-1993>

There is also a *Telegraph* interview with Fagan on the 20th Anniversary of the siege, in which he further outlines his belief in Koresh and the coming End Times at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9950378/Waco-siege-20-years-on-the-survivors-tale.html>

A Reuters interview with the Australian survivor, Clive Doyle, on the 20th anniversary can be read at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-waco-anniversary-idUSBRE93I16X20130419>. Doyle, like Fagan, talks of his continuing belief in Koresh as Christ.

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## Note

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Sarah Harvey. "David Koresh and the Branch Davidians." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 15 January 2021. Retrieved from [www.cdamm.org/articles/koresh-davidians](http://www.cdamm.org/articles/koresh-davidians). (First published 12 June 2017, [censamm.org/resources/profiles/the-branch-davidians](http://censamm.org/resources/profiles/the-branch-davidians).)

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