

Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect,*

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Like Jonestown, 'Waco' has become a byword for religious extremism. Both cases involved cults and both have contributed iconic, high-intensity images to posterity: the corpse-strewn jungle clearing after more than nine hundred followers of Jim Jones drank poison; and the blazing ranch on the Texan prairie, where eighty devotees of David Koresh perished. Such is the association of Waco with the inferno that it is perhaps unsurprising that all but one academic work on the Branch Davidians features a graphic photograph of the fire on its cover. Kenneth Newport's book is no exception, and it reinforces the feeling that the story of this group involves a journey to the outer limits of human experience.

The Waco drama began on 28 February 1993 when a raid by agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) on the ranch led to a gun battle with the Branch Davidians. Four agents and six residents died that day. The shootout ended in a ceasefire after which the FBI brought in a negotiation team to resolve the standoff. The siege lasted for fifty-one days until on 19 April the FBI attempted to flush the Branch Davidians out of their ranch using teargas. Bradley armoured vehicles, on loan from the Texas National Guard, were used to fire the teargas rounds, but fires erupted from the ranch and quickly reduced it to ashes. Only nine residents survived the inferno. Some are still serving prison sentences.

In contrast to the media coverage at the time, the body of scholarship on the Waco siege is not large – comprising two monographs and one edited collection as well as a number of uncollected articles – and so Newport's book is a

welcome addition. The book also fills a gap in the literature, being a study of the Branch Davidians and their actions against the backdrop of their theology. Beliefs govern how people behave, and the Branch Davidians were no exception to this. If we are to understand the self-immolation of the group on 19 April 1993 then we need to engage with their theology.

Newport situates his study in relation to the existing scholarship and also the popular, 'true crime' publications that were written and published within months of the siege's fiery denouement. Much of this latter work, largely produced by journalists, trades on the sensational aspects of the group, especially Koresh's polygamy and stockpiling of guns, but this obscures the religious motivations of his followers. Neither has the 'thought world' of the Branch Davidians been well-served by scholars: some details have emerged in a couple of publications, notably James Tabor & Eugene Gallagher's *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (1995), but as the subtitle of this particular book indicates, the agenda of the authors has been to explain the Waco siege in terms of a moral panic over cults in American society. According to them the Branch Davidians were viewed through a negative 'cult' stereotype rather than understood on their own terms. In contrast to many of the scholarly and popular publications, Newport's book is remarkable for his dispassionate approach. While he endeavours to understand the Branch Davidian mind, neither does he shy away from the less palatable aspects of the cult, especially the sexual relationships that Koresh had with underage girls.

Koresh's notoriety notwithstanding, there is more to the Branch Davidians than 'Waco'. Newport charts the history of the group from its founding in 1929 by Victor Houteff as an offshoot of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, its successive leaders and the development of its unique apocalyptic worldview. Newport acknowledges that some may question the wisdom of producing a book-length study of the Branch Davidians – given that its membership was never large or influential in American religious history – nevertheless, he argues that an

understanding of their theology is indispensable to any attempt to explain why the Branch Davidians were prepared to shoot it out with the ATF agents, resisted calls to surrender during the siege and later immolated themselves when the tanks moved in.

Newport's chapters on the fire that decimated the Branch Davidians are particularly impressive. Conspiracy theories, from websites to the film *Waco: The Rules of Engagement* (1997), have coloured much of the public's view of what happened. Many have been led to suspect that the FBI intentionally caused the fire in order to destroy evidence that would have incriminated the ATF (the Branch Davidians claim that the agents fired first on 28 February 1993). Newport argues, however, from a wealth of forensic and other evidence that the Branch Davidians themselves torched their ranch. There is no doubt about the cause of the fire, he maintains, but any explanation for it must also take into account the theology of the Branch Davidians. To this end he outlines the highly detailed theology that was developed by successive leaders of the group, who taught that a literal 'baptism of fire' would be their gateway into the millennial kingdom.

A major strength of Newport's book is that he has produced a highly readable analysis of the interplay between theology and events leading to the inferno. The chapters on the different leaders of the Branch Davidians and their theologies are detailed yet not dense. Newport has sought to outline the doctrines and the book is clearly an intellectual history of the group rather than a simple exposition of their theology.

However, the chapter on the theology of David Koresh himself is surprisingly light on detail. Newport says little about how Koresh used theology to inveigle himself into the Branch Davidians and gain a following even while another leader was in charge; or how Koresh moved away from continuity with his predecessors in the leadership after he had wrested control of the group from the previous leader. Throughout the book Newport emphasises the theological continuity between the

successive leaders of the group in building his case that the fire on 19 April 1993 was not an aberration, but that there was a tradition in the Branch Davidians that they would pass through fire. This eschatology, Newport argues, while not predisposing them towards collective suicide did provide a theological context for the apparent self-immolation of the group; that is, faced with the alternative of fleeing the teargas and surrendering to the FBI, they chose to keep prophecy on track by fulfilling it themselves. The story of the Branch Davidians awaits a more psychologically-nuanced study but Newport has produced what amounts to the definitive history of the group and its descent into extremism.

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