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What Ever Happened to the Branch Davidians?

By Tal Davis

April 19th, 1993 (thirty years ago next month) was one of the most tragic days in the history of United States law-enforcement. On that day, agents of the United States government, including dozens from the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), conducted a full blown military style assault on a small religious compound near Waco, Texas. The compound, called Mount Carmel by its members, was home to a strange cultic group known as the Branch Davidians. The group was led by a deranged "messiah" named David Koresh (real name: Vernon Wayne Howell). Several federal agents and at least eighty members of the cult, including a number of children, died in the attack, mostly consumed by a fire probably ordered by Koresh and set in the compound buildings by the members themselves.

The April 19th confrontation was the culmination of a fifty-one day stand-off that began with a gunfight on February 28th, 1993, when ATF agents attempted a previous raid on Mount Carmel. That raid was prompted by reports of child abuse and the possession of a large cache of illegal arms inside the Branch Davidians' complex. The agents were met with a hail of gunfire from inside, killing four of them. The agents retreated to regroup. But, finally, after seven weeks of failed negotiations with Koresh, U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno ordered FBI and ATM paramilitary forces to attack, take control of the compound, and arrest Koresh and other Branch Davidians leaders. Using armored vehicles, tanks, and tear gas, the government agents smashed through the building's thin walls opening gaping holes in their sides. The attack quickly got

out of control when a fire, allegedly started by the defenders and fueled by gasoline or other accelerants inside, ignited and spread rapidly through the wooden structures. In only a few hours the standoff was over, but Mount Carmel and most of its inhabitants lay in ashes.

Later investigations by Congress came to the conclusion that the fire was set by the Branch Davidians, and many of them had shot each other in a mass apocalyptic suicide. Nonetheless, the Justice Department, the FBI, and the ATF were strongly criticized for their incompetent and maladroit handling of the situation. Many experts on apocalyptic cults had warned the government law enforcement agencies in advance to proceed with extreme caution. They recognized that the Mount Carmel situation was volatile and could explode, just as it indeed did. The mass suicide by the People's Temple cult in Guyana in 1978 was a horrible example they should have remembered.

So just who were (or are) the Branch Davidians? The Branch Davidians' history can be traced back to its roots in the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDA). That now worldwide denomination was founded in 1863 by Ellen G. White (1827-1915). That unusual church believes that White possessed a modern "spirit of prophecy" as mentioned in Revelation 19:10. The church maintains that, as a young girl, she had a series of divinely inspired visions. The church asserts that her writings are, therefore, inspired interpretations of Scripture which formed the basis of the SDA. Her visions established a number of doctrinal tenets that are out of the mainstream of evangelical Christianity. Those include the following: Christians are required to keep the seventh-day Sabbath; that an "investigative

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judgment" by Jesus in heaven happened in 1844; that the dead are in an unconscious sleep state awaiting the second-coming; and fanciful interpretations of biblical prophecy about the end-times and the final judgment. (For a thorough exposition of Seventh-day Adventism go here:

<http://www.marketfaith.org/what-about-seventh-day-adventism/>)

It was this SDA belief that Ellen G. White possessed a special prophetic gift for interpreting Scripture that set the stage for David Koresh and other Branch Davidian leaders to come. The idea that one person, or small group, has the corner, so to speak, on understanding the real meaning of the Bible is a major characteristic of cults and sectarian groups. So when White died, some of her close followers maintained that they had been given the same prophetic knowledge that she had.

Therefore, after Ellen G. White's death in 1915, several of her followers vied for leadership of the church. One such would-be successor was Victor T. Houteff (1885-1955), a SDA living in California. In 1930 Houteff came to the conclusion that God had specially called him as a new prophet (somewhat like White) who was to prepare 144,000 dedicated believers for the last days. He published his ideas in 1931 in a book titled *The Shepherd's Rod*. While still a SDA, in 1935 he moved to Waco, Texas, with a small group of followers where he established what he called the Mount Carmel Center. In 1941, Houteff broke with the SDA and established the Davidian Seventh Day Adventist Association at Mount Carmel in Waco.

After Houteff's death in 1955, leadership of the group was assumed by his widow Florence. She boldly prophesied that in 1959 God was going to clear out the land of Pales-

tine of all Arabs and Jews, and that her movement would move there to set up a new Davidic kingdom. When her predictions failed, she sold off the Mount Carmel property in 1961 and dissolved the Davidian Seventh Day Adventist Association. Nonetheless, in 1965 the property was purchased by another Davidian named Benjamin Lloyd Roden (1902-1978). Roden claimed he was also a divinely inspired prophet. He died in 1978 and his wife, Lois Roden (1905-1986), claimed to be a new prophetess.

Around 1981, a young man named Vernon Howell (1959-1993) joined the movement. Impressed by him (there were rumors of an affair), in 1983 Lois Roden declared that Howell would be her successor as the next prophet for the group. After Lois' death in 1986, and despite strong opposition by Lois Houteff's son, George Huteff, who was arrested for contempt of court in 1988, Howell took control of the Mount Carmel property and the movement. Howell soon assumed the name of David Koresh, a Hebrew form of the name Cyrus (from Isaiah 45:1) and declared himself a new messiah.

As time progressed the remaining members of the Branch Davidians gathered at the Mount Carmel compound where Koresh taught bizarre interpretations of the Bible, especially the book of Revelation, and prepared his followers for a soon to come apocalyptic war. Consequently, a large arsenal of weapons were assembled in the compound. Koresh also took several men's wives and was reported to have fathered children by them (the men were prohibited from having sexual relations). Rumors also spread that Koresh was sexually abusing under age girls. These troubling reports were what prompted the government's intervention leading to the February to April, 1993, siege and fire.

After the 1993 conflagration, some surviving members of the group were

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tried and put in prison. Eventually most were released and attempted to reform the organization. One survivor, a man named Clive Doyle, who was found not guilty of any crimes related to the fire, took leadership of the Branch Davidian remnant. Around 2005, he left Mount Carmel and another former Davidian named Charles Pace (b. 1951) took it over. He took the title of Joshua, the Man Whose Name is Branch. He formed a new group called The Branch, the Lord of Righteousness. Only a few of the former Branch Davidians recognized his claim to leadership.

The Mount Carmel site of the 1993 battle has, in the years since, become something of a landmark for anti-government individuals and organizations. For many years an annual assembly met at the site. One such anti-government terrorist was Timothy McVeigh who, in retribution, blew up the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Okla., on April 19th, 1995, exactly two years after

the Mount Carmel event. That attack killed 168 people, the worst mass murder in U.S. history until the September 11th, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Today, thirty years later, it is difficult to find up-to-date information about who and where are the remnant of the Branch Davidians movement. In any case, the story of that group serves as a lesson for Christians and the government. It reminds Christians that false teachers, just as in the New Testament era, are still active in the world and can deceive many sincere people to follow their heretical doctrines. It also should be a warning to government law enforcement agencies not to underestimate the psychological power of fanatical prophets and messiahs to lead their true-believing disciples into a deadly spiritual abyss.

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