

## FROM SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM TO DAVID KORESH: THE BRITISH CONNECTION

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### *Introduction*

During the declining years of Ellen G. White and after her death, a number of individuals aspired to fill her leadership role in the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church. In 1993 David Koresh, a self-acclaimed prophet and leader of the Branch Davidians based in Waco, Texas, caused consternation among SDAs worldwide because the roots of his organization originated in an offshoot group from the SDA Church. About one-third of those who died in the inferno at Waco (23 individuals) had previously claimed some association with the SDA Church in Britain.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the links between Koresh and Victor Houteff, who earlier broke from the SDA Church, and attempt to provide reasons why so many Britons got caught up with David Koresh. To meet this objective, many unpublished materials have been researched, together with personal testimonies (particularly in the section: "The British Connection"). The limitations of the work, due to the unavailability of some reference materials, are recognized, but the material that is available makes an invaluable contribution to the understanding of why so many Britons died at Waco.

### *American Links*

#### *Victor Houteff*

Houteff's first religious affiliation was with the Greek Orthodox Church in the country of his birth, Bulgaria. After a clash with church leaders and difficulties with the government, he was violently expelled from his country, arriving in America in 1907 at the age of 21.<sup>1</sup> Victor Houteff joined the SDA Church in Rockford, Illinois, in 1919. Subsequently moving to California, Houteff ascended to layleader and Sabbath School teacher. By 1929, however, he became disillusioned with the church, challenged its theology, and taught his own reform doctrine, first in the church and afterwards in a nearby private home. Also in 1929, Houteff published his manifesto, *The Shepherd's Rod*. He

<sup>1</sup>Lowell Tarling, *The Edges of Seventh-day Adventism* (Australia: Galilee, 1981), 113.

was disfellowshipped from a Los Angeles SDA Church in November 1930 for teaching divergent views. Widely referred to as "Shepherd's Rod," his group took the official name, Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, twelve years later.

Houteff's offshoot, though not the first to break away from SDAs, has had the most damaging effect on the church from which it came. Not only did Houteff's group serve as parent and foster parent for a number of shorter-lived offspring (The Eleventh Hour Adventist Remnant Church—Isaac Branch; Calendar Research Organization, International; The Root of Jesse),<sup>2</sup> but it also served as the first link in a chain of offshoots that led to Koresh's group, the "Branch Davidians."

The essence of Victor Houteff's reform argument was that while "the SDA was indeed the authentic church of the remnant," "the church and its leadership had forsaken scriptural teachings and became overly materialistic and worldly." It was this concern of "worldliness" that was to be the catalyst for reform among the following of Houteff and subsequent self-styled prophets in the devastating chain of offshoots that led to tragedy at Waco in 1993.

The key points of Houteff's fundamental teachings, that subsequently passed along the chain to David Koresh, were: (1) The SDA church needed reforming; (2) a new "divine messenger" had been selected to "lead the purification process" by (3) unlocking the secrets of the seven seals in the book of Revelation, and (4) gathering the 144,000 faithful and setting up the Kingdom of David in Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

Houteff passionately believed that his warning message was specifically directed to Seventh-day Adventists. His intention was clearly noted in the first issue of *The Shepherd's Rod*: "This publication does not advocate a new movement, and it absolutely opposes such moves."<sup>4</sup> It was for this reason that Houteff exclusively targeted the SDA Church for sympathizers to his cause. "It is the intention of this book to reveal the truth of the 144,000 mentioned in Revelation 7," he boasted; "but the chief object of this publication is to bring about a reformation among God's people," whom he saw to be the SDAs. This divine mission to reform the SDA church from the inside was often carried out without due care for religious liberty, often using agitation to attract attention to the Davidian cause.

In 1935, Houteff and eleven of his sympathizers obtained 189 acres of land on the shores of Lake Waco, Texas, which they named Mt. Carmel.

<sup>2</sup>Tarling, 125-139.

<sup>3</sup>David Bromley and Edward D. Silver, "The Branch Davidians: A Social Profile and Organisational History," in *America's Alternative Religions*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 149-158.

<sup>4</sup>Tarling, 122.

From here they published literature abundantly, using the publications to infiltrate SDA congregations all around the world, in search of anyone who could be persuaded to join them. Houteff's teachings were taken mostly from Ezekiel, Isaiah, Daniel, Zechariah, Matthew, John, Revelation, and Ellen G. White's writings. He "believed that truth was revealed progressively. He often used the image of a scroll being unrolled, in reference to his own work, and referred repeatedly to his teaching as 'Present Truth.'" Thus he could argue that he accepted traditional Seventh-day Adventist teaching, but that he was presenting a new message for his age.<sup>5</sup>

There is a clear connection between Houteff's teachings and Koresh's as is pointedly exemplified by (1) the coming kingdom, located here on earth, would be ruled—not by Christ—but by another person, the antitypical "King David"; (2) David (the rod) is not Christ (the branch); (3) in that earthly kingdom, there would be "David the visible king and Christ the invisible king of kings."<sup>6</sup>

Although Houteff's resolve was to remain part of the SDA Church, despite having been disfellowshipped, the U.S. military draft in 1942 forced his hand and brought an unintended change in the Davidians organizational structure. Because the fewer than 70 members at Mt. Carmel were unable to claim the SDA Church as their bona fide religious home, they applied to the government for conscientious objector status on the grounds that they adhered to the commandments: "Thou shalt not kill" and "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." Their application was initially refused. George Reid comments: "Being unrecognized as members by Seventh-day Adventists, Shepherds Rod draftees faced serious difficulties. Therefore the leaders dropped their claim to be regular Seventh-day Adventist members and registered with the United States government under the name [General Association of] Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. . . . However, they continued to insist that they comprised the true and faithful Adventists."<sup>7</sup>

### *Florence Houteff*

The death of Victor Houteff in 1955 led to the elevation of his spouse, Florence Houteff, to the leadership role. She quickly sold the Mt. Carmel site and in 1956 began buying land twenty miles away, eventually

<sup>5</sup>Stuart A. Wright, ed., *Armageddon in Waco* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 23.

<sup>6</sup>Vance Ferrell, "Some of the Teachings of Victor Houteff," *Pilgrims Rest*, March 1993, 1.

<sup>7</sup>George W. Reid, "The Branch Davidians—Who are They?," *Adventist Review*, 1 April 1993, 6; "Conflict in Texas," Universal Publishing Association, 1993, 5.

obtaining 942 acres on which she established the New Mt. Carmel Center that boasted a 1200-seat auditorium.<sup>8</sup> It was here on a 77-acre compound that Koresh became so infamous.

Florence Houteff responded to the unexpected death of the Rods first prophet by declaring herself a prophet. Davidians had thought Victor was the “new Elijah who would help usher in the reign of God.” As such, he should not die. This unresolved mission no doubt assisted the revelatory message of Florence, who predicted the prophetic 1260 days of Rev 12 would start on 5 November 1955 and culminate on 22 April 1959. Jesus was to return then, and Victor Houteff would be resurrected as the antitypical David to hand his kingship over to Christ.<sup>9</sup>

That fateful day came and “over 1000 people met at New Mount Carmel to await the execution of Ezekiel 9 [the slaying of the non-Rod SDAs] and their deliverance into Gods kingdom;”<sup>10</sup> but Jesus did not return, nor did Victor Houteff come back from the grave. The Davidians were in shock; they splintered. During the summer of 1959 the official Seventh-day Adventist Church held a series of meetings at Mt. Carmel, in an attempt to bring the Davidians back into fellowship, but that too failed. In 1961, however, Florence Houteff announced that the “Rod literature was at variance with the Bible,” and in March 1962 she resigned and disbanded the organization, thus ending the second link in the chain to Koresh. The movement, however, did not die. A strong leader in waiting, Benjamin Roden, who had joined the Davidians in 1946, now became the prophet of the largest of eight splinter groups that formed after disbandment.

### *Benjamin Roden*

Ben Roden named his group the *Branch* Davidian Seventh-day Adventists, claiming that “V. T. Houteff’s Rod was dead, and his Branch was alive.” In his drive to appeal to a broad spectrum of the disaffected Davidians, he coined the slogan: “Get off a dead Rod onto a living Branch” (with reference to Isa 11:1). Roden’s cause was helped by the fact that he had not allied himself with Florence Houteff’s prophecy of 1959. He had even challenged her leadership on the basis that the prophecy was wrong, and presented himself as the “new voice of inspiration, the legitimate leader.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup>“Conflict in Texas,” 15.

<sup>9</sup>Marc Breault, “Some Background on the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Movement from 1955 to the Early Part of 1991,” in unpublished notes, Albert A. C. Waite Collection, 17 April 1991, 2.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>11</sup>“Conflict in Texas,” 16-17.

Roden “pronounced himself the successor to the biblical king David” (Victor Houteff had made a similar claim) and sought to establish God’s kingdom in Israel, where he secured a piece of land in 1958.<sup>12</sup> Shrewdly, Ben Roden initially promoted the Branch Davidian movement by offering “brand new truth,” as opposed to attacking past leaders and their teachings. He offered “supposed certainty instead of confusion, new light instead of familiar, oft-repeated teachings.”<sup>13</sup> He emphasized that the “people of God needed also to keep the feast days: namely Passover, Pentecost, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.”<sup>14</sup> His teaching of Victor Houteff’s “No type, no truth,” was carried to “ridiculous excesses”: Isa 8 and other literature were supposed to teach, for example, that the antitypical two tribes were the Branch and the antitypical butter and honey was truth.<sup>15</sup>

Roden directed his teachings both at the Davidians and at SDAs. Robert Olson noted that in 1967 the SDA church in Waco, Texas, had “a rival religious group,” who “persistently attempted to dominate the discussion in the Sabbath School classes by the introduction of their own peculiar ideas,” and “also caused much annoyance to our church members generally by repeated distribution of their literature on our church property.”<sup>16</sup> There may have been some variation in the teaching of Ben Roden from that of the Houteff’s, but cumulative information was evidently passing along the chain, and SDAs remained the main target group for proselytizing. According to Pitts: “Roden clearly built on the ideas of those who came before him. The writings of White and Houteff figured prominently in his publications. He envisioned his role primarily as the leader of the third and final phase of the movement.”<sup>17</sup>

This was not to be. Benjamin Roden died in 1978 and his widow Lois Roden quickly assumed the prophetic mantle of the Branch Davidians. When the group again splintered, Mrs. Roden named her followers the “Living Waters Branch,”<sup>18</sup> the fourth and penultimate link in the offshoot chain to David Koresh.

<sup>12</sup>Bromley and Silver, “Branch Davidians,” 151.

<sup>13</sup>“Conflict in Texas,” 17.

<sup>14</sup>Nicholas Gilbert, “Waco: A Social Psychological Analysis,” *Religion Today* 9 (Autumn/Winter 1993): 4.

<sup>15</sup>Breault, 5.

<sup>16</sup>Robert W. Olson, “The Teachings of the Branch Contrasted with the Teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church,” A Report, May 1967 (Newbold College Library, Ref. DF 367-b), 1.

<sup>17</sup>Wright, 32-33.

<sup>18</sup>“Conflict in Texas,” 20.

*Lois Roden*

The hopeful heir to Ben Roden's rule was his son George. But when in 1977 his mother, Lois, started having "spiritual visions," his cause was lost. Her first vision was "that the Holy Spirit was in fact female." She "elaborated on this vision, asserting that God is both male and female and that at the second coming the Messiah would assume female form."<sup>19</sup>

Lois Roden's zeal and prophetic insights attracted followers to Mt. Carmel and sympathizers in unexpected places. The concept of femininity in the Godhead drew interest from the feminist movement. One non-Christian, academic feminist reportedly said, "I don't normally take part in the God debate, but if the Holy Spirit is female and God is partly female, then this is certainly something we cannot ignore."<sup>20</sup> Mrs. Roden consolidated her appeal to the feminist movement by publishing a magazine entitled *Shekinah*. In its pages "she appealed to the Gnostic gospels, various esoteric Bible translations, ancient mythology, and a motley assortment of past and present religious and secular feminists."<sup>21</sup>

Lois Roden became successful. She gave lectures around the world, was featured in numerous magazine articles, appeared on television, was featured at "high class Christian functions not associated with Seventh-day Adventism, such as Christian music awards ceremonies,"<sup>22</sup> and "even attended a session of the World Council of Churches" to give "an extensive report on the Council's move to include women in church leadership."<sup>23</sup>

While Lois Roden was touring, the situation at Mt. Carmel deteriorated. The wooden buildings fell into disrepair. George Roden had challenged her at the death of his father for usurping his birthright (the presidency—the father's "crown of the House of David"), and she obtained a court order barring him from the property. George Roden crept back on site while Lois was on tour. It was into this feuding situation that Vernon Howell entered Mt. Carmel in 1981 as a handyman.<sup>24</sup>

Howell, who had held membership in the Tyler, Texas, Seventh-day Adventist church for about two years, but was disfellowshipped in 1981, "because of lifestyle and divergent views," soon made an impression at Mt. Carmel. Not only did he deliver an impressive "four-hour religious

<sup>19</sup>Bromley and Silver, 151.

<sup>20</sup>Albert A. C. Waite, conversation with colleagues in staff room, early 1980s.

<sup>21</sup>"Conflict in Texas," 23.

<sup>22</sup>Breault, 7.

<sup>23</sup>"Conflict in Texas," 23.

<sup>24</sup>Wright, 53.

lecture” soon after arrival, he “became useful to the organisation, washing dishes, fixing cars, and cleaning up trash around the run-down property. He soon became Lois Roden’s right hand man and progressed to being her driver as they traveled the country promoting her Shekinah message.”<sup>25</sup> The extensive travel with Lois Roden gave Howell the opportunity to demonstrate his ability to quote voluminous passages of the Bible. This appealed to many who heard him.

As their relationship grew closer, Howell became indispensable to her, thereby gaining the mantle of heir apparent. Lois died in 1986 and Vernon Howell, who later changed his name to David Koresh, became at age 27, leader of the Branch Davidians.

### *The British Connection*

Vestiges of Victor Houteff’s Shepherd’s Rod who have remained true to his original manifesto have maintained membership in many SDA congregations around the world. They have not diluted their doctrine with the modifications introduced by Florence Houteff, the Rodens, or David Koresh. Neither have they changed their tactics of reform—they still seek to dominate the Sabbath School discussion on Saturday mornings, and target newly baptized members with their reform message. There are at least three SDA congregations in London, England, currently experiencing the disruptive tactics of Shepherd’s Rod. In November 1999 the local leader of a West London congregation invited a specialist on Rod theology to address his congregation. The Rods activists were out in numbers and sought to dominate the question time, a skill they have perfected over the years. Only astute managerial skills averted an altercation.

### *David Koresh*

The continual havoc caused by the small group of Victor Houteff’s disciples is insignificant when compared with the damaging impact David Koresh has had on the SDA Church in Britain. His chief weapon was the fusion of SDA doctrine with the cumulative teachings of earlier offshoots (the Houteffs and Rodens) to form his particular brand of the Branch Davidians. Koresh’s message was made more potent by his claiming, with certainty, to be the “divine messenger” bearing “new light,” chosen to “unlock the secrets of the seven seals in the book of Revelation” (which had also been Victor Houteff’s fundamental claim for himself). Koresh’s effectiveness also had an element of luck—the chance meeting of Perry Jones (*Shekinah*’s editor) with Marc Breault (a ministerial student), who recruited Steve Schneider.

<sup>25</sup>“Conflict in Texas,” 23.

Schneider, who became Koresh's second-in-command, originally aspired to be an evangelist. The reference from his secondary school to Newbold College, Berkshire, England, in the early 1970s, praised his "outgoing nature and leadership quality." A reference from a pastor said, "Schneider will do well in working to draw other young people to the Lord."<sup>26</sup> At the end of the first semester at Newbold College, Schneider's grades were "very poor," perhaps related to his being heavily influenced by another American who was a local socialite. After a farewell party for his friend, "a drunken Steve Schneider was picked up by a taxi driver and taken to the police station. He was charged and eventually fined for disorderly behaviour. Newbold College asked him to withdraw. He did, on February 27, 1973."<sup>27</sup> Schneider never became an SDA evangelist.

Another disappointed, would-be minister was Marc Breault. He was trained to be a pastor, but soon realized that he would not be selected, partly because of a visual disability. In January 1986, while shopping in a supermarket in Loma Linda, California, and "in the wrong frame of mind," he was stalked by Perry Jones (the polished academic and chief journalist for Lois Rodens magazine, *Shekinab*). During their conversation, Jones made Breault feel important and valued, with comments such as: "You're a really unusual young man. I've got to go to a religious conference in Washington, DC, this week, but I'd like to get in touch with you when I get back." Within four days Jones introduced Breault to Koresh outside Breault's apartment. Marc Breault narrates his first impression of Koresh:

He couldn't have been more friendly. Immediately I liked him. One thing that impressed me was that Vernon knew where he was going and what he wanted to say, and, by God, did he say it! "I will show you more in three hours than you've learnt all your life," said the man who was to change my life—forever.

We all went inside my apartment and Vernon conducted his promised three-hour Bible study. He hammered me over and over with the same message, that God always worked through prophets, and he quoted me this passage: "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets." The secret that Vernon claimed God had revealed to him exclusively was the total understanding of the book of Revelation, the book that talks about the end of the world.

<sup>26</sup>Albert A. C. Waite and Laura Osei, "The British Connection," *Spectrum* 23 (May 1993): 34.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.



He impressed me with his command of the Bible, and after a few Bible studies I decided to follow him. [In hindsight] it was the biggest mistake of my life.<sup>28</sup>

By this time, Steve Schneider was thirty-six years old, and teaching “a comparative religion class at the University of Hawaii.” Breault knew that as a respected teacher at the Diamond Head SDA church in Hawaii, and “resident expert in the book of Revelation,” Schneider was well placed to influence others if he could be recruited into the Branch Davidians. In June, 1986, less than six months after Breault decided to follow Koresh, he arrived in his home town, Honolulu, Hawaii, with the sole purpose of converting his friend Steve Schneider. He recounts:

My plan was simple: contact my best friend, Steve Schneider, and convert him first. Steve would do the rest. He was a born evangelist, the best I had ever seen. Steve could not keep his mouth shut. Once he got enthusiastic about something, there was no stopping him. . . .

I must admit that Vernon’s message took a lot of explaining, and Steve wasn’t very receptive at first. He had been raised a Seventh-day Adventist, and I was telling him things that went against everything he believed in. . . .

Vernon taught that God would shortly return to earth with fire and lightening and establish a kingdom in the Holy Land in Israel, along with a king who naturally would be Vernon. His subjects would be a mighty army of immortals who would slaughter all the wicked of the earth, starting with the Christian church.

Steve became convinced that this was the truth, and he had a good reason for feeling sympathetic to another faith. He’d given up years of his life to train for the ministry only to be beaten to the pulpit by an inferior candidate.<sup>29</sup>

These SDA Church rejects were to become its adversaries. The Branch Davidians were now led and bolstered by Koresh, Breault, and Schneider, who not only had the gifts of friendship, evangelism, and phenomenal recall, but also knew the teachings of the SDA Church and sustained vendettas against it. This was a potentially damaging concoction that the church was not immediately aware of. In 1987 the “team proselytized the membership of the SDA Diamond Head Church in

<sup>28</sup>King and Breault, *Preacher of Death* (London: Signet, 1993), 50.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 67-68.

Hawaii,” and returned to Texas with fourteen of its members.<sup>30</sup>

The year 1988 was a momentous one for the Davidians. The previous November, there had been a shootout at Mt. Carmel, between George Roden, who also claimed to be the Son of God, and seven men led by Koresh. Semiautomatic weapons were used in the exchanges. David Koresh and his “mighty men” were arrested and charged with attempted murder. The ten-day trial in April 1988 resulted, unexpectedly, in a mistrial verdict in favor of Koresh’s team.<sup>31</sup> A favorable court result, along with the previous years successful recruiting drive in Hawaii (Koresh also recruited successfully in Australia in 1986), encouraged Koresh to embark on the next wave of recruitment. Two months after the trial, Koresh went to Australia again, while dispatching Steve Schneider to Britain.

Fifteen years earlier Schneider had left Newbold College in a bad light. He returned, unknown, as a “John the Baptist,” with a vendetta against the church, proven evangelistic skills, and no earthly goods but a backpack and a Bible in his hand. As Marc Breault paints it: “The students and their conservative teachers were no match for the sophisticated smooth-talking American.”<sup>32</sup> “Schneider made friends easily on the open, relaxed campus. Soon he was talking to gatherings in a bungalow on college property occupied by kitchen staff. He constantly invited students to come and see. Some students began displaying drooping eyes after attending long, nightly meetings. The buzz among the students mixed with uneasiness among the faculty.”<sup>33</sup>

Schneider had sought a facility in which to hold meetings at Newbold College, but his request was refused. Within a short time, Schneider “converted” three theology students: Livingstone Fagan, John McBean, and Clifford Sellors, and persuaded them to become recruiters. McBean targeted Manchester where his girlfriend lived; Fagan, after being dismissed as a minister, openly concentrated on his home town, Nottingham, while an organized group focused on London. The recruiters had made substantial gains among academically sound theology students, whose conversions were consolidated by a visit from Koresh, who held all-night Bible sessions. This inspired the recruiters to move throughout Britain, doing their work among other SDA communities.

In London, they recruited “a group of newly baptized Greek

<sup>30</sup>Wright, 63.

<sup>31</sup>David Leppard, *Fire and Blood: The True Story of David Koresh and the Waco Siege* (London: Fourth Estate, 1993), 73.

<sup>32</sup>King and Breault, 117.

<sup>33</sup>Waite and Osei, 35.

Cypriots who had just began attending meetings sponsored by *Our Firm Foundation*. In turn, the Greek Cypriots influenced Teresa Norbrega, Leslie Lewis, and Bernadette Monbelly.” Others such as Diane Martin and Livingstone Malcolm were to follow, but their conversion had little impact on ordinary church life. There were no confrontations or police involvement as had taken place in some churches in America and Hawaii.

The relatively peaceful recruitment in London was not repeated in Nottingham. While Livingstone Fagan served as an intern minister in Leicester, he stirred up his congregation with a variety of variant doctrines. It was not long before his license was revoked, and he was eventually disfellowshipped. Fagan influenced his mother, Adina Fagan, and his cousin Beverley Elliott, who “had recently suffered a broken relationship and was desperately seeking redirection for her life,” to join his family (spouse Yvette and two young daughters) on the road to America. Elliott managed to sway Winston Blake and her best friend Suzie Benta that Koresh’s way was the right one. All seven of them went to Mt. Carmel, Waco.

John McBean’s focus was on Manchester. Having won over his girlfriend, Diana Henry, a psychology student, it was her turn to recruit her four younger siblings, ages ranging from 19 to 26, together with her mother. In all, twelve (Zilla Henry and her five children, a cousin, and friends) who were socially connected, went to Waco from Manchester. The recruitment process in Manchester was met with the most organized and peaceful resistance in any of the areas in Britain.

In a package obtained from Dr. Jeffrey Brown, a pastor in the Manchester area at the time, it is evident that the churches there were alerted to the recruitment drive in the South of England. The Manchester South SDA church organized lectures and discussions through the youth club (Koinonia) with the sole intention of educating their young people on the topics that were being used to “brainwash” their fellow Adventists. One of the titles for an open forum held at the Manchester South Church on Monday night, 19 February 1990, was: “Should We Give New Light A Chance?” Some of the other items included in the package were: (1) “Prophets and Messengers In Our Times, New Light” (a compilation from Ellen Whites writings, profusely underlined, and sent to Dr. Brown by Philip Henry, a new Branch Davidian convert); (2) “Principles of Interpretation” (an obvious tool to aid sensible interpretation of Scripture); (3) “Helpful Points in the Interpretation and Use of Ellen G. White Writings”; (4) “The Shepherds Rod vs. the Seventh-day Adventist Church”; and (5) “Notes on Steve Schneider and Vernon the Prophet.” The latter advised, “Their tactic if you try to engage them in logical debate, is to become illogical. Then if you switch to illogic, they switch to logic. They are cunning and clever. They cannot be beaten. Their methods are

calculated, brain-washing. Their policy is to agitate and confuse, and to bring in new light."<sup>34</sup>

The new converts to Koresh's movement used the Koinonia meetings for their own ends. They did "agitate and confuse" and were rather confrontational. The Koreshians also organized an alternative meeting to a Youth Day at Manchester South church, where a number of visiting speakers were scheduled to present seminars. The Koreshians' topic, "Discover New Light in Your Bible," was well attended.

Neither the church in Britain nor its tertiary educational institution, Newbold College, up to 1993 when the siege began at Waco, gave Koresh's threat to its members and students much attention. The earliest document unearthed that recognized this threat dates from 1990, some two years after Koresh and his disciples plundered Britain. It was written by Cecil R. Perry, then president of the South England Conference, and sent "To All Elders." The two-page letter warned of "individuals claiming prophetic gifts in our ranks," arguing in the words of Jesus, "Watch out that no one deceives you" (Matt 24:4, NIV).

Perry made direct reference to Koresh (Vernon Howell):

*Take Notice*—It has been brought to my attention that one of our churches in the British Isles is having difficulties in that the disciple of one *Vernon* who claims to be a prophet or messiah, is trying to entice some of our young people away from the church. He has made more than one visit to London and is at present elsewhere in the country.

This so-called foreign student lays claim to prophetic insights and that he would lead a people to Palestine for the purpose of establishing the Davidian Kingdom.<sup>35</sup>

The penultimate paragraph explained that "the intent of this letter is to alert you to some of the strange views that are seeking entry into our churches." Noble as this intention was, the elders were not encouraged to do anything—strengthen the faith of the young people in the Scripture or otherwise. Apart from the work of the Koinonia club in Manchester, not much was done publicly to counter the activities of Koresh's recruiters.

In 1991-1992 John McBean visited friends and lecturers at Newbold College and tried to gain their interest in the "new light" David Koresh was brandishing. He told one lecturer, "I don't know everything. But you have nothing to lose. Just come and see. This man will show you things in the

<sup>34</sup>These materials may be found in the unpublished Albert A. C. Waite Collection, Newbold College Library.

<sup>35</sup>C. R. Perry to All Elders, South England Conference, 21 February 1990.

scripture, in three hours, that you have not seen in all your life.” That invitation to visit Waco was refused with the request: “Send me some literature.” At that time, very little was known about Koresh’s teachings. What was known was by hearsay or what had been gleaned from one or two long nightly sessions in 1988. There was a dearth of written information.

As it turned out, information was available in personal files at Newbold College, but this was not shared. In a detailed letter from Australia, dated 20 May 1991, Ian Manning, an ex-Branch Davidian member whom Koresh taught for three years, informed Gilbert Valentine, Newbold College chaplain, of the seriousness of the new Branch Davidian movement. Manning established his credibility by naming some of the students that left Newbold for Koresh in 1988; he stated that some of the staff members had attended the meetings then, and named an Australian SDA president who was cognizant of the communication he was sending out. He also included a tape of Koresh (which he said would “leave no doubt in your mind as to what spirit is controlling Vernon Howell”) and a 21-page document by Marc Breault, who had escaped the clutches of Koresh in September 1989, titled: “Some Background on the Branch Davidian Seventh-day Adventist Movement from 1955 to the Early Part of 1991.” Manning’s purpose for sending all that information to Gilbert Valentine was reasoned: “Both myself and others who have left Howells following consider him and his followers as dangerous. . . . Most of us who left Howell have received death threats.” He therefore sought help to locate John McBean, Cliff Sellors, and others, whom he understood were no longer with Koresh. He believed that a “united approach” in trying to save these people would be more effective. Any doubt about the dangers of Koresh should have been dispelled with the reading of Marc Breault’s document, which began with the warning: “I will state here that the Branch Davidian group is a dangerous organisation and I believe it is led by satanic forces! I did spend considerable time exploring their doctrines but I have rejected the vast majority of them. They, like most everyone else, have grains of truth, but they are small grains, and very scarce.”<sup>36</sup> Manning’s letter and the document by Breault were not discovered until after 28 February 1993, when the siege began at Ranch Apocalypse (Mt. Carmel), Waco. The tape said to have been enclosed was never found.

The beginning of the siege and the inevitable media coverage linking the SDA Church with it, jerked the British SDA Church leaders into involuntary action. Cecil Perry, by then president of the Church’s work in the British Isles, Paul Tompkins, and D. N. Marshall sent out letters 1 March giving historical details of Koresh and the Branch Davidians. D. W. McFarlane, the president of the South England Conference, wrote a letter

<sup>36</sup>Breault, 1.

of 2 March that contained equally startling detail. Cecil Perry's letter to his field leaders begins: "Dear Brethren, Seventh-day Adventists are in the news but for the wrong reasons." He informed them of the positioning of key Adventist institutions such as the world headquarters of SDA in the USA, Newbold College, and the British Stanborough Press (editor, D. N. Marshall) *vis-a-vis* David Koresh, and stated: "Pastor Paul Tomkins, BUC [British Union Conference] Director of Communication, has faxed the media stating that the Seventh-day Adventist Church dissociates itself from the Davidian sect and its teachings."<sup>37</sup>

David Marshall's letter pointed out a neglect to educate the young people regarding the "wolves in the camp." He wrote: "When I phoned around the field leaders two years ago to ascertain whether I should print anything about Vernon and his followers, it was estimated that only about a dozen of our folk were aware of their existence. It was believed that a printed statement would give them unnecessary publicity."<sup>38</sup>

As it happened, that was a serious misjudgment. Even in the name of religious liberty, with which the church is traditionally concerned, the manifestation of care to that one "dozen" young people would have signaled a balanced treatment to the problem Koresh and the Davidians posed.

### *The Caribbean Connection*

By 19 April 1993, when 23 Britons (the majority with Caribbean connections), died in the inferno at Waco, more SDA "experts" had contributed to television chat shows and given radio and newspaper interviews. On 21 April, the *Daily Telegraph* carried the title: "Koresh and the Caribbean Connection," in which Damian Thompson wrote: "During the early years of this century, Seventh Day [*sic*] Adventism made great strides in the West Indies and as a result has a large West Indian following in this country. Given that Koresh recruited specifically from Seventh Day [*sic*] Adventists, it was inevitable that a large proportion of his British followers would be from the Afro-Caribbean community."<sup>39</sup>

On the same day, Walter Schwartz wrote in the *Guardian*: "Derek Beardsell, principal of Newbold College, said West Indians may have been an easier target because Caribbean churches tend to be more conservative and the extreme end of conservatism is fundamentalism." A week later, Beardsell's analysis of the situation was countered by Winsome Hines in the *Voice* newspaper.

<sup>37</sup>C. R. Perry to Field Leaders in the British Isles, 1 March 1993.

<sup>38</sup>D. N. Marshall to C. R. Perry and Paul Tompkins, 1 March 1993.

<sup>39</sup>Damian Thompson, *Daily Telegraph*, 21 April 1993, 2.

Many argue that there is a cultural connection between Black people and religious allegiance. But Pastor Cecil Perry, president of the British Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church, denies that Black people are more culturally susceptible to religious recruitment than other races.

“It is a myth that should not be perpetuated,” said Perry, “for there are socio-economic reasons to consider. Charismatic figures attract all sorts of people regardless of race, colour or religious affiliations.” Every race, he argues, can fall victim to cults and sects. “It was a multi-cultural community that perished out there in Waco. Out in the Orient vast numbers follow the Moonies.”<sup>40</sup>

### *Factors That Aided the Recruitment Process*

The factors that aided the recruiting process in Britain are not unique to this territory. Ronald Lawson, quoting several sources, gives a broad summary of the type of SDAs that chose to follow Koresh:

Those converted from a church in Hawaii were of diverse socioeconomic status, often active in the church, typically in their twenties, and recent converts to Adventism; those from England were mostly educated black Adventists with a Caribbean background. Of those who had become Koresh's chief lieutenants, one had a law degree from Harvard, another had recently completed an M.A. in religion from Loma Linda University, an Adventist school, and a third had studied at Andrews University, home of the Adventist Seminary.<sup>41</sup>

Most of the Britons that went to Waco fit one or more of the following categories: experienced personal or relational problems; fanatical about a human religious leader; dissatisfied with the biblical content of a course; seeking deeper, more personal religious experience; unwitting victims of subtle techniques of psychological coercion; and/or new converts to the SDA Church.

### *New Converts*

It has been the established ploy from Victor Houteff to Koresh to evangelize within the SDA Church. They, being former Adventists, know

<sup>40</sup>Winsome Hines, *The Voice*, 27 April 1993, 13.

<sup>41</sup>Ronald Larson, “Seventh-day Adventist Responses to Branch Davidian Notoriety: Patterns of Diversity within a Sect Reducing Tension with Society,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 34 (1995): 334.

that new members are usually enthusiastic and thirsty for more "revelations" from the Bible. There is nothing more suitable to satiate this thirst than deep meaningful Bible study. That is why offshoots with connections to Adventism normally target new members. Like the Hawaiian recruits and the Greek Cypriots, Cliff Sellors, and others were relatively new SDA members. The promise of "new light," convincingly presented, was too much for them to resist.

### Relational Problems

Lewis Rambo states that: "Whether political, religious, cultural or psychological, crisis of some kind usually precedes conversion"<sup>42</sup>; although, as Sue Mousley explains, "the timing of crisis, i.e., before or after encounter with the advocate, may vary." She continues,

Lofland and Stark (1965), investigating the *importance* of crisis within the conversion process, discovered that, for some of us, *tension* in our lives triggers a religious quest. Dr. Waite argues that "if one generalisation is possible" about specific Britons that went to Waco, "it is that they had enduring relational problems, particularly conflicts with their families, sometimes having endured the trauma of a divided or divorced home."<sup>43</sup>

Adam Fresco concurs, referring to Derek Lovelock, a survivor from Manchester: "But while the rest of the family resisted the overtures of the Davidians, Derek, who had separated from his wife and was depressed after losing his job, joined the sect."<sup>44</sup> A significant number of the Britons who followed Koresh to Waco were experiencing some form of transition.

### Fanatical

Fanatical adherence to anything, even the Bible, is unhealthy. Diane Martin, John McBean, and Cliff Sellors were examples of Britons who were fanatical about the writings of Ellen White. They read her works selectively (without regard for the balance inherent in those writings when read in their entirety), and they read her almost exclusively, even more than they read the Bible, and regulated their lives by this selective and exclusive reading. Sellors read Ellen White almost exclusively. Based on selective reading, Martin

<sup>42</sup>Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), quoted by Sue Mousley, "An Attempt to Validate Rambos Theories of Religious Conversion," unpublished B.A. independent study, University of Derby, Summer 1998, 14.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Adam Fresco, *The Times*, 20 April 1993, 2.



followed a diet so regimented that Ellen White herself would have rebuked her. Unhealthy familiarity with a human prophet was a contributory factor in the recruiting of Marc Breault. He recalls his response to Perry Jones's invitation to see a real live prophet: "Well, the Seventh-day Adventist Church was founded by a prophet . . . , who says God cant raise up another one. Sure, Ill talk to him [Vernon]."<sup>45</sup> Ellen White did not place her writings on an equality with the Bible, emphasizing that her work is a "lesser light" leading to the greater light, the Bible.<sup>46</sup> SDAs recognize that while Ellen Whites work is constructive and wholesome for the believer, it is not a test of faith, nor is it essential for salvation.

### Dissatisfaction with Bible Courses

Livingstone Fagan graduated with an M.A. in Religion, and John McBean with a B.A. in theology from Newbold College. Cliff Sellors, an "A" student, was one year away from graduation when he left to follow Koresh. The three men, independently, often complained about their courses and their lecturers: "The lectures are OK, but they are not presented with any conviction." "Apart from one of them [lecturers], they have no personal testimony, no faith." "You have to imagine life in Palestine to make sense of the lectures." "The academic standard is good, but you are expected to question everything."

It was into that situation that Schneider and Koresh came in 1988. Their tailored mixture of Adventist doctrines and "new light," with measured helpings of criticism of debatable SDA doctrines, was presented with certainty and enthusiasm. They displayed remarkable knowledge of the Scripture and Ellen Whites work. Definitive answers were given. They also claimed to have personal testimonies and a direct relationship with God. It did not take long to win over the students who were idealistic and dissatisfied with their Bible classes.

### Deeper Spiritual Experience

A commonly perceived need among many of the British recruits was for "a deeper spiritual experience." Halsey Peat described this as the tendency to "operate in the affective domain and use it as a basis for their "reasoning." They want to *feel* that they are accepted of God but have difficulty accepting the truth of Gods word that they are *already saved* by his grace. They know the theory but lack the assurance. There exists a

<sup>45</sup>King and Breault, 49.

<sup>46</sup>Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1946), 256-257.

vacuum of feelings just waiting to be filled."<sup>47</sup>

The longing for a more "spiritual" experience can be filled positively or negatively. It all depends on which agent is accepted first. In the cases of Sellors, McBean, and Fagan, Koresh preempted the Church, boasting direct connection with God, and providing a false sense of satisfaction.

Ian Ha'p'orth's description of the type of people who join cults is relevant to the British recruits. "By far the majority of people who are recruited into cults are in fact normal and healthy," he argues. "They have average to above average intelligence and are well educated, idealistic people. . . . All ages are influenced and many are professionals. It appears that anyone can be recruited. . . . They become unwitting victims of subtle techniques of psychological coercion."<sup>48</sup> "Unwitting" here does not necessarily indicate a cunning ploy to captivate the unsuspecting. It pertains to the person playing an active part in his/her own conversion. Gilbert<sup>49</sup> cites Lofland and Skonovd's six motifs of conversion: intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive. Koresh's recruiters used experimental, affectional and revivalist strategies to bring about the conversion of unwitting victims. Gilbert reasons:

Curiosity is the motivation behind the experimental conversion motif where the individual wants to know more about a movement, but there is also social pressure which may increase as the individual becomes more involved. The motif is relevant because many converts went to initial meetings held by Koresh out of a sense of curiosity; pressure to attend meetings in the very early stages was relatively low.<sup>50</sup>

As the record shows, "the Branch Davidian doctrine spread quickly amongst the unsuspecting and largely Black SDA membership in Manchester and Nottingham because of the tight knit nature of the Black community."<sup>51</sup> Six members of the Henry household in Manchester, plus cousins; five members of the Fagans in Nottingham, not including cousins and friends, are evidence to the "affectional" motifs with its "interpersonal bonds and social network to conversion."

Once the recruitment process was set in motion, the recruiters would exert intense social pressures on the initially unsuspecting relatives and

<sup>47</sup>Halsey Peat, "Are We Producing Fodder for Sects?" *The Metro Herald*, 2 April 1998, 3.

<sup>48</sup>Ian Ha'p'orth, "Myths and Realities," *Counselling News*, June 1993, 14.

<sup>49</sup>Gilbert, 3.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>51</sup>Hines, 13.

acquaintances; this, with the exuberant delivery of dramatic messages, formed the hallmark of the “revivalist” motif—an integral part of Koresh’s strategy in the latter stages of the recruitment process in Britain. (The literature gives evidence of “coercive” conversion, involving physical force, later at Waco.)<sup>52</sup>

Gilbert concluded that Koresh’s recruitment success in Britain was largely a function of his extensive use of existing social networks. Curiosity, combined with a degree of social pressure, was an attraction for the unsuspecting to attend Koresh’s recruitment sessions.<sup>53</sup>

### *Conclusion*

Sixty-four years elapsed from 1929, when Victor Houteff left the SDA Church, to the inferno in Waco, where 23 Britons died. Houteffs basic beliefs and practices were inherent in each of the five links in the offshoot chain from Houteff to Koresh. Each leader claimed to be a divine messenger, commissioned to proclaim new truth to, and reform the SDA Church. Each link targeted the SDA Church for its own growth. And so, even though each new group became further removed from the SDA Church in terms of theology and historical origins, each maintained personal direct links to it for purposes of recruitment. The doctrine of “new light,” claiming to “unlock the secrets of the seven seals in the book of Revelation,” was common to all five groups.

David Koresh, the last in the chain of offshoots, benefited from their cumulative doctrines and recruitment techniques. Six factors that aided his recruiting drive have been cited above: (1) relational problems, (2) fanaticism, (3) dissatisfaction with Bible courses, (4) seeking a deeper religious experience, (5) susceptibility to psychological coercion, and (6) being a recent convert. Some of these are directly related to church membership and others are related to more general societal contexts. The British connection to Koresh was not a Black connection. The racial origins of the 23 Britons who died in the fire was not of decisive significance. Other factors such as disillusionment with the church, relational problems, and the search for a deeper religious experience, arguably played a more significant role in their deception. Koresh, a former SDA, knew the culture of the church, targeted the church’s new converts, and offered them “new light,” which he taught with certainty and conviction. He attracted theology students who were dissatisfied with the biblical content of their courses, or who had grievances with the

<sup>52</sup>King and Breault, 143.

<sup>53</sup>Gilbert, 3.

church. From this group he lured his most effective recruiters.

There can be no guarantee that another Waco-type incident will “never happen again.” *Homo sapiens* have choices, which they exercise, normally freely, even in choosing a god. Since the Waco tragedy in 1993, the world has had other cultic disasters, including the death of 39 members of the Heavens Gate cybercult and its god-posturing leader, Marshall Applewhite. It behooves churches to assist their members in personal growth and development that will protect them from the trap of cult leaders such as David Koresh.