

## Whose Mistakes?

A Review Article of *The Branch Davidians of Waco*

by Kenneth G. C. Newport

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**ABSTRACT:** This review article argues that Kenneth G. C. Newport's book on the Branch Davidians of Waco, the most comprehensive research to have been published to date on this subject, is deeply flawed and biased. It is argued that Newport often downplays, misrepresents, or outright withholds evidence that would not fit with the suicidal picture he wishes to draw for the Branch Davidians in general and for David Koresh in particular, and that he leaves the most important questions not only unanswered, but even unasked. The bias that hampers this book from being a truly critical academic scholarship is clarified, and the interrelated and dangerous politics it substantiates is criticized.

**KEYWORDS:** Branch Davidians, David Koresh, Waco Branch Davidian Disaster, Seventh Day Adventists, Religious Pluralism

## Intoduction

Nothing could prepare me for the “Concluding Observations” of Kenneth Newport’s book *The Branch Davidians of Waco*. Not his moralizing of the Seventh Day Adventist Church leadership that they had “let the membership down” by not sufficiently addressing the question of “why *were* so many Seventh-day Adventists among the dead in Waco” (Newport 2006, 15; emphasis original); nor his unrelenting (indeed, sometimes even desperate) efforts to exonerate law enforcement authorities from almost any culpability for the horrifying events that took place at Mt. Carmel Center in 1993; nor even his inexorable venture to portray the Branch Davidians as suicidal as possible, even to the point of proposing self-contradicting arguments and withholding evidence that would not fit this picture. All this became rather pale when I read Newport’s conclusions. There I learned that “Waco was indeed a tragedy and the result of some fundamental mistakes.” Whose mistakes? On the one hand, Newport concedes, law enforcement agencies did make two fundamental mistakes: The ATF went ahead with the raid even though the element of surprise was lost, and the FBI implemented the CS-gas plan. But, on the other hand, “this is not the end of the list of big mistakes.” Apparently, the Branch Davidians also made some big mistakes. And what were those mistakes?

The Branch Davidians were wrong in thinking, however sincerely, that God was about to set up a kingdom to be ruled by the antitypical king David. They were wrong also in thinking that this kingdom would come through a fiery rebirth of the chosen, prophetically led, remnant people. They were wrong in thinking that Koresh was who he said he was: the seventh angel of Revelation who could reveal the secrets of the ends and the person to whom the book of

Psalms pointed. They were wrong also to believe Schneider, who in the Manchester tapes promised them unequivocally that they would come back riding on white horses as an avenging army if they were willing to face a short-term death (Newport 2006, 343).

Upon reading this, amazed, I thought to myself what would have happened if this was not a book about a powerless and dispersed religious group such as the Branch Davidians. Suppose this book dealt with the siege laid by the county *milites* of York on York Castle, where many Jews huddled in fear on March 1190, and most of them lost their lives during and after the fiery end of the siege.<sup>1</sup> Would then Newport have still claimed that, while it was a clearly a mistake on the part of John Marshall, the sheriff of Yorkshire, to try to eject the Jews from the castle by force, the besieged Jews also made some fundamental mistakes? And what would be those mistakes? That they did not recognize Jesus Christ as Lord? That they believed that the Davidic Messiah is yet to come? That they stubbornly kept the *mitzvot* which have been annulled by the new dispensation? That they believed the Jewish dictum, according to

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion, Dobson 1974, esp. 26-31. There is of course a difference between the U.S. FBI/ATF and the county *milites* of York, as there is between the 20<sup>th</sup> century Branch Davidians and 12<sup>th</sup> century English Jews. This, however, does not detract anything substantial from my argument, and, in any case, should not be overemphasized, as Dobson's comment that "the tragic story of the York Jews in the spring of 1190 is a specific commentary on these two themes – governmental inexperience on the one side, and the deliberate exploitation of mass hysteria on the other" would sound alarmingly familiar to anyone who has studied Waco. Cf. also Brent Shaw's (2009) intriguing comparison between Waco and two other similar premodern historical events.

which one must choose death when the only the other option is idolatry?<sup>2</sup> And would Newport have claimed that, in this case as well, “unfortunately” (for them?), “being right or wrong turned out to be a matter of life or death”? (2006, 343) I wonder if Newport would have been able to keep his post in his “ecumenical” institute, Liverpool Hope University, if he did that.<sup>3</sup> Nay, further, I doubt whether Oxford University Press would have printed a book with such conclusions. But, since we are dealing with the Branch Davidians, which Newport compares to a (dead?) body that has “twitched somewhat” after April 19<sup>th</sup> 1993 (2006, 337), it seems that there is no reason to fear it would be able to strike back; “ecumenism” can therefore stop there and then. But for Newport, this does not even seem to be an issue of “ecumenism”; for his part he dismissively acknowledges that “in a post-modern intellectual climate it has become rather unfashionable in academic circles to say that people’s religious

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<sup>2</sup> The dictum is complicated, but in general there are three things to which a Jew should prefer death: when s/he is coerced to murder, to commit certain sexual acts, or to participate in idolatry (cf., for example, Talmud Bavli, *Sanhedrin* 74a). Throughout history many Jews considered (and some still consider) at least some sects of Christianity to be idolatrous for various reasons.

<sup>3</sup> When the book was published, Revd. Prof. Kenneth Newport was a Pro Vice-Chancellor of and Professor of Christian Thought in Liverpool Hope University (<http://www.hope.ac.uk/newport>), which was then defined as “ecumenical Christian Foundation which strives,” among other things, to encourage “the understanding of Christian and other faiths” to promote “religious and social harmony” (<http://www.hope.ac.uk/about-hope/mission-statement.html>) and is “fully open to those of all faiths and beliefs” (<http://www.hope.ac.uk/about-hope/the-values-of-hope.html>) (all references cited April 18th 2010).

beliefs or their interpretation of the Bible are wrong” (2006, 343). Myself, I was completely baffled by this statement. Does Newport believe that in a modern climate it is “fashionable” to raise (and act upon?) such claims? Are not religious pluralism and the separation of church and state quintessentially modern phenomena?

Yet Newport is right to the extent that “post-modern climate” is relevant to his claims, or even to his book as a whole, yet in a very different way. This review article will show that Newport’s book revolves around three interrelated arguments: (a.) the Branch Davidians, and David Koresh himself, were extremely suicidal *because of their theology*. Therefore, (b.) law enforcement agencies have very limited responsibility to the horrendous outcome of the Waco siege, but (c.) the Seventh Day Adventists Church do (or at least should) carry some of this responsibility, for they foster similar beliefs. To evaluate such claims, any “postmodernist” will tell you, it is extremely important to know where the claimant is positioned. Here, it would have helped if the reader knew that Newport was an Seventh Day Adventist himself and taught at Newbold College, until he felt that “he could not teach what he didn't believe” and left to become a priest in the Church of England; and that he also believes that the difference between the Seventh Day Adventist Church and the Branch Davidians beliefs is a matter of “degree,” rather of “kind.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Larson 2007. It is interesting to note that Newport teaching career in Newbold College and his Adventist past were (and still are) conspicuously absent from his homepage in Liverpool Hope University, which stated only that he has “taught at the University of Manchester, St Andrew’s University and in Hong Kong” (<http://www.hope.ac.uk/newport> (cited April 18th 2010; for the updated version see [https://my.hope.ac.uk/academic\\_profile/index.php/Aps/ext/knewport](https://my.hope.ac.uk/academic_profile/index.php/Aps/ext/knewport)). It is still a detail of information that is very hard to come by through any internet search for his

This review article, however, will not deal with any theological mistakes: here I must plead ignorance.<sup>5</sup> Although I do have my own beliefs, I do not know, much less can I prove, whether David Koresh was whom he claimed he was, or where are now those who died on the April 19<sup>th</sup> conflagration and on the February 28<sup>th</sup> shootout.<sup>6</sup> Nor do I know whether Newport's church, either the previous or the present one, are right in their doctrines. Therefore, from this point onwards, I would deal only with what I know and believe I can prove: that Kenneth Newport's line of argument in his book is faulty, indeed sometimes even contradictory, and that he often downplays, misrepresents, or outright withholds evidence that would not fit with the suicidal picture he wishes to draw for the Branch Davidians in general and for David

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name. It would only be fair if I would say a few words here about my own background as well: I am a secular Jewish-Israeli currently living in Jerusalem. I was never affiliated with any specific synagogue nor any other religious institution.

<sup>5</sup> To really counter the ATF and FBI's lists of "mistakes", one could have easily proceeded on the same level of discussion, and instead of comparing wrong actions with allegedly wrong beliefs, argue that the Branch Davidian's mistakes were, perhaps, stockpiling weapons without proper permits and/or returning fire after being attacked by the ATF. However, as has been and will be further demonstrated, Newport has a very different *theological* axes to grind that explain this awkward comparison.

<sup>6</sup> At least as this last statement goes, it seems that Newport has somewhat retracted his previous theological judgment. In a later article he conceded that "[W]here they are now cannot be proved or disproved" (Newport 2009, 75).

Koresh in particular, and that he leaves the most important questions not only unanswered, but even unasked.<sup>7</sup>

This review article will proceed along the line of Newport's book but will be devoted mainly to the parts that deal with the David Koresh era of Branch Davidian history. To deal with the earlier parts is impractical, since much of the source material quoted by Newport is not available to me. Thus, I would have to leave the evaluation of these parts to a latter occasion.

### **The "Well-Planned" ATF Raid**

At the very beginning of the book, we read that the ATF raid was carefully planned and included "month-long surveillance operation" (Newport 2006, 1; cf. also 8: "planned as a well-executed operation"). Most, if not all, of the people who are even a little bit read on Waco would have had a hard time to keep a straight face here, but this has already been noted by other critics (e.g., Wright 2007). Here I would like to show how this characterization does not hold up even to the evidence Newport himself brings.

As Newport starts to analyze the ATF plan, he notes that the ATF spoke with two defecting members of the group as well as with Joyce Sparks, from the Texas Child Protective Services Department. He mentions that from the information they got from them they should have surmised that the Branch Davidians were preparing for a violent confrontation with the U.S. authorities (Newport 2006, 241). While Newport himself is vociferously convinced that it was the ATF attack that started that the

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<sup>7</sup> In fairness to Newport, I will only cite sources and studies that were available when he finished his book, "Eastertide, 2004" (2006, xi). However, it would soon be shown that in many cases Newport can be disproved from himself.

apocalyptic clock that would inevitably end in the April 19<sup>th</sup> conflagration, he does not even pause for a minute to consider whether the ATF commanders who “carefully” planned the raid and conducted a “month-long surveillance”, even sending an infiltrator into Koresh’s group, should not have considered for just a moment whether it was wise to fulfill prophecies believed by an armed apocalyptic group.

A second point in contention is whether the ATF would not have done better to arrest Koresh outside the Mt. Carmel residence. Newport desperately tries to defend their actions by saying that the ATF might not have known that the Koresh frequently left Mt. Carmel, nevertheless admitting that this was “serious breakdown in intelligence on the ATF’s part” (Newport 2006, 244). This hardly sounds like a “carefully” planned operation, and, moreover, Newport himself brings proof that they *did have* such an intelligence. Just 40 pages earlier we read the following in the affidavit procured by the ATF:

Sparks, two other people from the Department of Human Services and two McLennan County sheriff’s deputies visited Mt. Carmel, but Koresh was not there. However, Koresh went to see Sparks in her office in early March to discuss the charges and she returned to Mt. Carmel on 6 April and again on 30 April (Newport 2006, 203).

That is, the very affidavit that Newport does his best to defend included the info that a. Koresh left Mt. Carmel frequently and b. tried to cooperate with the authorities even on his weakest points, and positively responded to invitation to appear in government offices in Waco.<sup>8</sup> One may also add that, according to this information,

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<sup>8</sup> While there is a still a continuous argument whether Koresh could have been charged of substantive weapon violations, almost every scholar who studied Waco (including Newport) agree that the evidence shows Koresh did commit statutory rape,



unannounced non-violent visits to Mt. Carmel should not have been considered *prima facie* dangerous, again against what Newport argues in order to support the ATF raid (Newport 2006, 243-244). Speaking of the quality of intelligence, just a few paragraphs later Newport admits that the Branch Davidians knew they are being watched from a house across the road, and they also knew that Robert Rodriguez (or “Gonzalez”, as they knew him) is an undercover agent trying to infiltrate their community (Newport 2006, 246). Still, we are expected to accept that the ATF plan was almost immaculate, despite all those blunders.<sup>9</sup>

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probably more than once. He had thus much more to fear regarding that and still tried to cooperate. Quiet amazingly, Newport tries to argue that Koresh’s sexual exploits were part of his “death wish” to bring about a confrontation with the authorities, even though Newport himself brings the evidence of Koresh’s cooperation with Joyce Sparks’ investigation and his practice to marry off some of the “House of David’s” women to other members of the community in order to fend off any suspicions (Newport 2006, 202-203).

<sup>9</sup> Newport also fails to provide us with survivor David Thibodeau’s account, that shows how heavy handed and amateurish were those agents who conducted the “well-executed” surveillance operation, and how easy it was to see through them. Here is just one anecdote: “[Schneider] sent David Jones, Greg Summers, and Neal Vaega to the house to welcome these neighbors with pizza and beer, but their reaction was startling. One man opened the door, grabbed the pizzas and beer, and slammed the door in the visitors’ faces. ‘They don’t want us to see what’s going on inside,’ Steve concluded” (Thibodeau and Whiteson, 1999, 136); the whole description in 135-140 contains numerous examples of how amateurish was the surveillance, some of which are even comical (e.g., the agents claimed to be studying philosophy at Texas State

So let us review the issue: a raid that planned a violent attack on an apocalyptic group that the ATF should have known were expecting to be attacked by the U.S. government, serious breakdown in intelligence (or, more likely, willfully ignoring non-supporting information), a surveillance group who were easily recognized as such by the Branch Davidians, an undercover agent whom everyone knew was an infiltrator, deciding not to arrest Koresh outside of Mt. Carmel although they clearly knew he frequently left the premises, and, on top of that, going forward with the violent “dynamic entry” raid when the element of surprise was lost, all these considered by Newport to constitute a “carefully” planned raid. I prefer not to know what Newport would have called a “haphazardly planned” operation.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Day of the Raid**

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Technical College), but none of which are even mentioned in Newport’s appreciation of the ATF “well-executed” plan.

<sup>10</sup> Newport concedes that the decision to go forward with the dynamic entry raid when the element of surprise was lost was a “huge error” (Newport 2006, 247). In other places in his book, however, he could easily revert to a much milder judgement, either qualified by “with hindsight” (Newport 2006, 17) or even to surmise that both the ATF and FBI blunders had a “small supporting role” that led to an almost deterministic tragedy (Newport 2006, 342). The element of surprise was lost since a TV journalists team, who was tipped off regarding the raid, lost their way and asked for directions from David Jones, who just happened to be a Branch Davidian himself. Jones almost immediately informed Koresh of the raid. Robert Rodriguez, the aforementioned undercover ATF agent, was then informed by Koresh that he knew of the raid. Rodriguez left the residence at once and informed the ATF headquarters.

Newport argues that once this exceptionally carefully planned raid started, the “eschatological timetable” has been drawn out by Koresh, and that would have inevitably led to the tragic end of the siege, no matter what the ATF or FBI did afterwards. Now Newport does discuss the 911 tapes, beginning by the call Wayne Martin made just a few minutes after the shootout started, begging the shooting to stop.<sup>11</sup> However, nowhere does he stop to explain why, if the Branch Davidians were indeed convinced they were attacked by Babylon, should they even try to negotiate with its representatives instead of fighting on with full force the inevitable apocalyptic battle.<sup>12</sup> While this may be considered as arguing from silence, Newport attempts to

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<sup>11</sup> For the record, however, Martin did not “hung up” just after he begged the shooting to stop (contra Newport 2006, 252). That is what happens when one relies on government reports (e.g., *Danforth Report*, 134) instead of listening to the evidence. The shooting, as well as Lt. Larry Lynch exasperated attempts to contact the ATF and tell them he has “an open line into the compound”, can be easily heard on the recording for long minutes afterwards.

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Newport 2006, 253: “A heavily armed religious group that had long expected to be set upon by the agents of Satan shortly before their passing into glory were pointing some ferocious weaponry out of the windows of their home at those they considered to be an end-time foe.” Quite conveniently, at this crucial point Newport also fails to mention that Koresh also came to the phone and negotiated with Waco Police Lieutenant Larry Lynch in a rather well-tempered and laid-back way. Here is an example, although without the tone of the voice it is hard to fully appreciate it: “You see, you brought your bunch of guys out here and you killed some of my children. We told you we wanted to talk. No. How come you guys try to be [B]ATF agents? How come you try to be so big all the time? ... We will serve God first. Now,

present evidence of Koresh's apocalyptic mindset in these very early stages of the conflict. His evidence is KRLD recordings of Koresh from just after the cease-fire with the ATF was brokered, specifically mentioning that "I am going home, I am going back to my father and we ... will see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great glory and power" (Newport 2006, 254). However, Newport does not care to engage with the theological implications of Koresh's possible death (from his *present wounds*) vis a vis his survival (which turned up to be the case). At that point of time, Koresh, who was hit twice by shots from ATF agents, believed he was dying.<sup>13</sup> While Newport does mention that "Koresh expected to die", it is unclear whether this is meant regarding *his present situation after the ATF shootout*, and no theological implications are drawn from this belief over against his eventual survival. It seems

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we will serve the God of the truth. Now, we were willing, and we've been willing all this time to sit down with anybody. You've sent law enforcement out here before" (full discussion and transcription of this call has been available at least ever since Tabor and Gallagher 1995 (cf. 97-100); the recording is available and was available in 2004 from many documentaries and archives). Newport mentions it later, without any quotations, and terms it "frantic" (Newport 2006, 263), without any evidence.

<sup>13</sup> According to Koresh's understanding of the apocalyptic scenario, his own death was inevitable and would form a crucial part this scenario. That is, if he dies, there is no doubt the apocalypse has set. See already Tabor and Gallagher 1995, 10. This is clear to Newport as well, although he refrains from critically applying it to the situation at hand; cf., for instance, Newport 2006, 226: "Koresh is Christ and just as he was killed before by the Jews 'who knew not what they were doing' (cf. Luke 23.34), so he will be killed again now, and this time by the Gentiles who again 'don't know what they do'".

that Newport either originally meant that he expected to die at the end of the siege (as he mentions later in 264) or that he purposely conflates the two expectations in order to bolster his argument. It would have perhaps been better if, in addition to the selective quotes from the KRLD interview, Newport would have quoted the message Koresh left on his mother's answering machine, which most patently shows his state of mind in the early hours of the siege:

“Hello, Mamma. It's your boy. ... They shot me and I'm dying ... But I will be back real soon ... I'm sorry you didn't learn the Seals, but I'll be merciful ... I'll see ya'all in the skies.”<sup>14</sup>

It is clear from this message, which was an extremely personal and honest one, that on Feb. 28th Koresh expected to die quite soon and assumed he will not be speaking with his mother again (at least not in this incarnation). No one with even a meagre understanding of Branch Davidian theology would have argued that as long as Koresh believed he would die *soon* from *his present wounds*, any negotiation would be well-nigh impossible. However, the evidence shows that once Koresh understood that he was not dying, he updated his understanding of the situation, which is why the fiery end did not follow immediately, but rather 51-days of negotiation ensued.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> This was available to him from Dick Reavis's book (Reavis 1995, 24). As an aside, it is quite astounding how Newport can lump Reavis's well-researched account to conspiracy theorists work like Linda Johnson's *Waco: The Big Lie*, and refer disparagingly to the “findings” (in scare quotes) of these works. Apparently, if you dare to doubt the government account you are a conspiracy theorist, even if your book is “exceptionally well-written” (Newport 2006, 7).

<sup>15</sup> Newport returns to this “Feb 28 mindset” speculation quite a few times in this book (e.g. 263; and worse still in his conclusion, 243: “from day one Koresh was set on

There is very little to say about Newport's discussion of the 51-days siege. Again he argues that Koresh knew he would die in a final apocalyptic battle. And again, no one with even a sketchy understanding of Branch Davidian theology would doubt that. Again he ignores how Koresh's mindset continually changed depending on the circumstances as well as the indisputable fact that *he was not dying* despite what he originally believed on Feb. 28<sup>th</sup>.<sup>16</sup>

The only point that must be mentioned is the awkward detailed description of and quotation from Victorine Hollingsworth and Kathy Schroeder's criminal case testimony, in which they argued that the March 2<sup>nd</sup> exist plan, which Koresh cancelled, was a plan for mass suicide. After spending 3 full pages on that, including word-for-word long quotations of their rather confusing and hard to follow testimony, he surmises this excursus by saying: "Schroeder and Hollingsworth may have been lying of course. However, there seems no reason why they would do that" (Newport 2006, 269). Since Newport must have known that both Hollingsworth and Schroeder

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'going home'") as well as in later publication (Newport 2009, 89) although in those cases he does not even care to mention Koresh's belief that he was dying from the ATF shots.

<sup>16</sup> While Newport does note how contextual and changing was Koresh's interpretation of scripture (see, for instance, Newport 2006, 214: "Perhaps the first thing to note about Koresh's theology is that it was not static"), for some reason, once the siege begun, he believes it became sealed in stone. Nowhere does he address the ample evidence that show how the mostly government-controlled context of the siege effected the way the Davidians in general and Koresh in particular understood their situation. This is amply exemplified by Tabor and Gallagher 1995, 9-22 and *passim*.

were government witnesses,<sup>17</sup> I wonder what is worse: that Newport does not know what a government witness means or that he does and prefers to hide this information from his readers. Moreover, Newport also does not bother to mention that this description of events is vehemently denied by virtually all the other survivors.

Later, he takes the position that all those who left the Mt. Carmel resident during the siege were the “weaker” members that Koresh tried to get rid of because he prepared the group for an assault. It may be that Newport was given this explanation during the “entire Saturday” FBI negotiator Byron Sage “gave up” for him, but one would have expected from a scholar who studied the group to be more critical.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Reavis, for instance, cynically calls Schroeder “the government’s star witness” (Reavis 1995, 288).

<sup>18</sup> Newport 2006, ix. It is unfortunate that a scholar of religious studies or even a theologian would rely uncritically on the testimony of Byron Sage, who did not seem to possess any real understanding of historical Christianity, was not well-read in the New Testament, and thus does not seem to have had any idea of what Koresh was trying to express. One example, which could be funny if its outcome was not so sad, is how Sage decided Koresh was a conman and thus surmised the CS-gas plan could work. When Sage asked Koresh point-blank whether he is (a) Christ, Koresh answered “I am saying that no man can know me nor my father unless they open their book and give a fair chance in honesty and equity to see the seals.” (Negotiation transcript, March 17th, 1:45 p.m. - 2:05 p.m.). It is quite clear that Koresh is paraphrasing John 8:19 and thus his answer is a clear “yes”. Sage, however, understood it a sharp “no” (See his interview the the PBS Documentary *Waco: The Inside Story* [1995]. Transcript available at <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/waco/wacotranscript.html> ).

Without counting the children, which were the majority who left (21/35 according to Newport's list), there are at least two names that come into mind immediately: Catherine Matteson, who was a veteran of the group from before Koresh's time, stayed a staunch Branch Davidian and believer in Koresh messiahship till the end of her life, and testified she did not want to leave.<sup>19</sup> And Livingstone Fagan, whom Newport himself interviewed and is still a staunch believer after all these years, even after serving a prolonged jail sentence. They are not the only obviously "non-weak" members who left, but these two prominent members should have given a scholar such as Newport a pause, more so when speaking about "maternal instincts" which were at the base of the FBI's bungled attack.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Matteson stressed she did not want to leave at, for instance, an interview she gave at the Jeff Davis Show, entitled "Justice for the Davidians", which aired on Nov. 25, 1996. It is available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5yq-AtNEH0&ab\\_channel=ScannedImages](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5yq-AtNEH0&ab_channel=ScannedImages)

<sup>20</sup> Again, Newport can also be proved wrong from himself. In 270, he mentions that Yvette Fagan, who allowed her children to leave, came to regret it and argued it was a big mistake to send them out. She said that in the video that the Davidians filmed in Mt. Carmel, which the FBI possessed, and thus should have given them a pause to rethink their reliance on "maternal instincts" which, in any case, dehumanized the Davidians. Quite expectedly, Newport then goes on to contradict himself just 23 pages later, mentioning the same Fagan's testimony to show the resolve of the group and how the FBI acts just strengthened the group's resolve even more (293). That is, in agreeing to send Fagan's children out, Koresh weakened his remaining group, if one follows Newport's contradictory reasoning.



Despite Newport devoting almost 5-pages to the testimony of Hollingsworth and Schroeder *in their role as government witnesses*, when it comes to the exit plan drawn by Koresh due to the intervention of Philip Arnold and James Tabor, and arranged through Koresh and Schneider's lawyers Dick DeGuerin and Jack Zimmerman, Newport can be extremely laconic, even though here we have primary evidence.<sup>21</sup> He does not even mention that both Koresh and Schneider signed a representation agreement with their lawyers, and brings a highly expurgated version of the letter Koresh sent on April 14<sup>th</sup>. He quotes the beginning:

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.

But seems to not have space in his hefty book for the highly future-oriented lines that follow:

This written Revelation of the Seven Seals will not be sold, but is to be available to all who wish to know the Truth. The Four Angels of Revelation are here, now ready to punish foolish mankind; but, the writing of these Seals will cause the winds of God's wrath to be held back a little longer. I have been praying so long for this opportunity; to put the Seals in written form. Speaking

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<sup>21</sup> Quite awkwardly, in the first chapter of his book, Newport refers to the possibility of putting Tabor or Gallagher on the phone with Koresh and its purported futility (9). However, Eugene Gallagher was not involved in the attempt to intervene and inspire a peaceful solution to the siege. The people on the scene were Phil Arnold and James Tabor. This anachronism seems to suggest that Newport never took the time to learn about Arnold and Tabor's intervention in detail.

the Truth seems to have very little effect on man. I was shown that as soon as I am given over into the hands of man, I will be made a spectacle of, and people will not be concerned about the truth of God, but just the bizarrrity of me in the flesh. 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. I thank my Father, He has finally granted me the chance to do this. It will bring New Light and hope for many and they will not have to deal with me the person. I will demand the first manuscript of the Seals be given to you [Dick DeGuerin]. Many scholars and religious leaders will wish to have copies for examination. I will keep a copy with me. 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.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The letter is longer than that, but Newport is evidently citing from Tabor and Gallagher and expurgating it to fit his purpose. Instead of discussing and providing the letter in full, Newport is more eager to correct Koresh's Hebrew: in 231 n. 8, he notes that Koresh signed his letters by writing Hebrew words in the reverse order, and thus wrote Koresh Yahweh instead of Yahweh Koresh. This, however, is hardly clear. Koresh might have had his reasons to switch the order, since he may have considered Koresh [in the name of] Yahweh to be a less brazen use of the tetragrammaton, which only carries its holiness when it is written in Hebrew characters. This, in any case, merits further research, but Newport correction seems to serve no purpose rather that ridicule Koresh's learning. Be that as it may, in 190 n. 63, Newport mentions that the Adventists congregation in Israel is in "Rehov, Lincoln." Unfortunately, we still do not have towns in Israel named after Abraham Lincoln; "Rehov" just means "street"

But this is not all. Just a page before that Newport declares that “from this point [i.e. March 15<sup>th</sup>] the negotiation tapes do not contain much that could be considered evidence of a willingness to leave Mt. Carmel on Koresh’s part” (Newport 2006, 272). Again Newport fails to mention this important tape from April 16th in which Koresh speaks with “Dick” in his almost usual laid-back way and clarifies the details of the exit plan, corroborating word for word what he wrote in the letter:

Koresh: . . . I say that when I get through writing these, and they're given to my attorney, and my attorney hands them over - What's the two theologians names?

Steve Schneider: Ah - Phillip Arnold and Jim Tabor.

Koresh: Phillip Arnold and Jim Tabor who have shown that they have a sincere interest in these things - you see? Then I can spend all my time in jail, and people can go ahead and ask me all the stupid questions they want - cause they're not gonna ask me about the seals. They're gonna say, "Ah, do you molest young ladies?" "Ah, have you eaten babies?" "Do you sacrifice people?" "Ah, do you make automatic weapons?" "Ah, do you have [unintelligible]" That's what they're gonna be interested in - sensationalism.

FBI: That's why you need to get it done before you leave there then.

Koresh: That's why I'm gonna complete it, because you see, you know as well as I do that people in this world they want something dramatic and sensational. They don't want to have to sit - No one's gonna sit there - and let me sit there in front of a camera and read Psalms 40 to them - to prove the first seal. Dick,

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in Hebrew. Thus the building is located on 4-6 Lincoln St., Jerusalem, just across the road from the Jerusalem YMCA.

it's a real world, and that's why I'm sympathetic with your position. I realize you're frustrated, and I agree with you.

FBI: I'm not frustrated. I went home and I'm back. I'm no longer frustrated. I never was frustrated.

Koresh: Did you take a shower for me?

FBI: Well, yeah. I took a couple of them for you.

Koresh: Thank you. I appreciate it.

FBI: Now listen. Let's get back to the point in hand. This ah - you know - the writing of the seals. OK. You've got to do that in there, and it's gonna take you x amount of time. But - just tell me this David - are you saying that when you finish that manuscript-

Koresh: Then I'm not bound any longer [unintelligible]-

FBI: No. But see, that doesn't answer the question.

Koresh: Then I'll be out - yes - definitely.

FBI: I know you'll be out, but that could - excuse me I've got a cold. That could mean a lot of things David. That could mean-

Koresh: I'll be in custody in the jailhouse. You can come down there and feed me bananas if you want.

FBI: I know - I know that some point in time that's true. But I'm getting from you - I'm asking you, "When that is finished, are you than telling me that you are coming out the next day, or two hours after you send that out or what"?

Koresh: Oh, I'll probably - when I - when I bring it out - see - my attorney is gonna get the - get to the copy.

FBI: Right.

Koresh: OK? And as soon as he hands it over to the scholars - the theologians - right?

FBI: Um, hm.

Koresh: That's when - he's gonna come back, and that's when I'm going to go out with him, because he said point blank that - you know - one of the guarantees of me arriving down there is that he is gonna go with me.

FBI: So you go on paper here and said that David Koresh told me that as soon as he finishes this manuscript - the seven seals - of which you've finished the first chapter dealing with the first seal-

Koresh: The first seal - right.

FBI: That you're gonna make that available-

Koresh: I'll be splitting out of this place. I'm so sick of MRE's - Dick - that ah

FBI: Well, I just want to make sure that I have this right - that you're coming out. As soon as that's finished-

Koresh: That's what - it was said by the attorney's-

FBI: Well, I know - I know.

Koresh: That's what I'm saying-

FBI: OK.

Koresh: It's clarified. Lock, stock, and barrel it.

FBI: I mean - I've heard you say that you're coming out after, but that is not specific. You know - that's a game that we all can play.

Koresh: It's - look, I know. Dick-

FBI: But I'm asking you for your word. You say that you're coming out as soon as that's done, and you give up the manuscript to DeGuerin who is gonna make copies available for Arnold and the other - the other fella-

Koresh: Right.

FBI: The other Biblical scholar, and then you are coming out with that manuscript.

Koresh: I'm outta here. And he's he's gonna come, and the way the procession is to be - I'm to go out first with him, and then I think, "You're last, right Steve"?

Steve Schneider: Yeah.

Koresh: With his attorney, and the other people - the other people in between.

FBI: OK. Then - you know what? I'm keeping you from getting back to work. So I'm - you know what I'm gonna do? I'm gonna let you go so that you can get back to work, because David, frankly I'm eagerly awaiting this manuscript.

Koresh: Well, I'll tell you what. It's gonna blow your socks off.

FBI: Well - I'm - I'm perfectly willing to - to read it, and I'm looking forward to it as a member-

Koresh: You'll either hate me or love me then.

FBI: Well, I want to read it - and then - I'll - you know - make a decision then, and we'll see how it goes. And in the meantime, ah - you know - let's get that thing written.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Negotiation transcripts, Apr. 16<sup>th</sup>, most easily accessed through James Tabor's compilation *The Last Words of David Koresh*, made in 1995, and widely available on the internet. Once again, if Newport bothered to bring either the letter in full or these negotiation transcripts, he would have noticed that the people involved in the negotiation were Tabor and Arnold, not Gallagher. As an aside, it is quite touching how Koresh believed that the FBI negotiator would care about his manuscript once the siege is over. That means "Dick" has either been doing a very good job or that

No matter how the negotiator tries to corner Koresh, he clarifies his exit plan (in coordination with Schneider) in minute detail and reiterates one by one the stages he recounted in his letter. But Newport fails to provide this evidence to his readership; instead he reiterates the FBI arguments that Koresh broke his word before, even though the differences are clear: lawyers are involved, Koresh has a definite and detailed exit plan, he goes forward to describe the results of his exit, including him being jailed, trusts the protection of his lawyer, and so on.<sup>24</sup> But the most telling difference is that it is clear that here Koresh feels he has a good *theological* explanation of why he is leaving Mt. Carmel to end up in jail, and how would that effect the salvation of humankind without them having to deal with him in person. And that was the major contribution of Arnold and Tabor's intervention (see already Tabor 1994, 13-21).

But, even though, or perhaps because, he is a theologian by profession, Newport does not seem to be interested in that. On the other hand, he seems all too keen to get to the next chapter to show that the Branch Davidians started the fire and how that only goes to show how defective is SDA theology. He sets the stage for the upcoming material by saying that the FBI CS-gas plan was a "necessary act of force

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Koresh was just a very trusting person, and believed even FBI agents (which, as Newport tells us again and again, were, in Koresh's mind, representative of Babylon), still had a chance to be saved.

<sup>24</sup> Somehow, Newport also fails to note that the FBI lied on-air in saying they had information that Koresh was not writing anything (Tabor and Gallagher 1995, 19-20). Moreover, a few pages later he slips into FBI mode by mentioning the "broken promises to come out" in the plural, although he knows perfectly well it only happened once (Newport 2006, 278).

to bring about the desired end” (Newport 2006, 274). I doubt that many FBI agents would still stand behind such a statement today. That a theologian that has just explained to us the only way the Branch Davidians could react to such “necessary act of force” would still write this without a shiver is simply beyond belief, unless the “desired end” was their very extinction.

### **The April 19<sup>th</sup> Conflagration**

In the very beginning of the next chapter, which, together with the next one, deals with a non-question (from a religious studies scholar point of view), Newport tries to argue that no matter how well-informed were the FBI agents or how much they would have agreed to cooperate with Tabor or Arnold, the Branch Davidians would never have come out, and thus the “question of who started the fire is pivotal”.<sup>25</sup> This is just not the case. Speaking for our kind, we are religious historians. No one trained us as legal scholars and much less so are we forensic ones, and thus a

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<sup>25</sup> Newport 2006, 279. It makes one shudder to think that Newport may imply that an attack – which tragic consequences were quite foreseeable to anyone who understood basic Branch Davidian theology – was necessary because the Davidians would not come out themselves no matter what. I hope that I am wrong here and Newport is not arguing that. Perhaps we should pose Newport a question he never answers directly: suppose he was there instead of Byron Sage, would he have signed the CS-gas plan? And if not, why does he believe that had the FBI consulted with Tabor or Arnold and actually tried to learn the theological implications of what they were to do, that would not have helped? Because that would disprove that SDA theology is inevitably deadly?



reiteration of the Danforth report is futile.<sup>26</sup> One can also read *Why Waco?* by Tabor and Gallagher, written probably when Newport was still a SDA member, and perfectly understand that the Davidians had (like many other Christian and non-Christian groups) an apocalyptic mind view, and if someone was to confirm their prophecy and push them to the very limit, they would act on their belief. The alleged “scarcity” in which this question is dealt with in much of the scholarly material is not because Newport is the only brave scholar to argue this viewpoint, but because it just does not really matter whether (some) Davidians started the fire on purpose, whether it started accidentally (which, even if it did, many Davidians would have interpreted it prophetically as well), or whether the answer is a combination of both.

The pivotal questions are a. *why didn't the fire start for 51 days, but only when the Davidians were attacked*, b. *why, when the attack started on 6:00a.m., the fire broke out only around 12:00*, and c. *why, during those crucial hours, some of the Davidians, including Steve Schneider, tried to reestablish connection with the FBI (after their phone line was cut off by one of the FBI tanks) and tell them David already completed part of the manuscript and that it can be delivered as is*, even though Newport's trusted source Byron Sage alternated between ridiculing their leader and promising the Davidians that even if the line was fixed, it would only be

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<sup>26</sup> As an aside, discussion of conspiracy theories that argue that the FBI set the fire in purpose (Newport 2006, 280) have no place in an academic book, at least as far as their veracity is concerned. To spend any amount of place on disproving them is just to use a rag doll and score some illegitimate easy points.

used to coordinate their exit.<sup>27</sup> They, in contrast to the FBI and Byron Sage, did not give up negotiation up until their modest building was collapsing on them.<sup>28</sup>

But those are questions Newport never addresses. Instead, he is excited to start a pointless whodunnit discussion and corroborate what happened with the apocalyptic Branch Davidian theology. Without, even for a moment, considering why did the FBI brought these prophecies to pass and pushed the Branch Davidians to their very limit, which outcome could have been clear to whoever understood even the basic of their theology, that the FBI had 51(!) days to learn. I usually teach that in one class, and then the students are just dumbfounded when they learn of the ATF and FBI actions. And this is not because I am such a great teacher. It is patently clear to

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<sup>27</sup> This all can be heard in the bug tapes to which Newport had access, and which he uses extensively when it fits his purpose. For a contextualizing discussion, see especially Wessinger 2017. In fairness to Newport, he does at the very least mention that Ruth Riddle, who existed the burning building on the very last minutes, carried with her a diskette containing Koresh's unfinished manuscript (Newport 2006, 273), although he contextualizes it not in the chapter discussing the fire (where it would fit chronologically) but in the previous chapter.

<sup>28</sup> Again, this could have been amusing if it was not so sad. When the CS-gas was inserted into Mt. Carmel, Sage blasted: "You've had your fifteen minutes of fame, Vernon; you're not the messiah anymore; it's all over now." Yet his tone changed when the fire started: "David, don't do this to your people. You're the messiah, not the destroyer". Once again, it is strange how Newport fails to mention both "messages" by Sage and the effect they might have had on the Davidians during their last hours.

everyone who has even a basic understanding of Christian apocalypticism or has ever read the Book of Revelation. Knowledge of SDA theology is not even required.

### **Conclusion**

This review has demonstrated the inadequacy of Newport's book as critical academic research. I have argued that the book is based on three interconnected premises: the existence of strong suicidal tendencies in Branch Davidian theology, its origins in SDA teachings, and the way this exonerated the law enforcement authorities of any major responsibility to the tragedy at Mt. Carmel. In many cases, I demonstrated that many of Newport's arguments can be disproved from his own text. In other instances, I have provided evidence that should have been available to Newport, but he chose not to provide it to his readership. I have also underlined the heavy bias of this book, the way it affects its dealing with the evidence, and the dangerous politics this stance advances.

More generally, I must stress that a discussion of theological "errors" does not even have a place in academic book, and that has nothing with "postmodernism". It has to do with secular historical critical methods that just do not ask those questions, because it simply cannot, and would not, answer them. Quite perplexingly, in another place Newport says that Branch Davidian interpretation of scripture is faulty because it does not use "historical criticism." (Newport 2008, 76). That may indeed be so, but I would have expected that someone who received a doctorate in New Testament from Oxford and belongs to the Church of England would also be aware that virtually all New Testament books that interpret the Hebrew Bible do so without any slight

attempt to use a historical-critical method.<sup>29</sup> And that to say nothing of the whole Anglican interpretive tradition. But perhaps *quod licet iovis, non licet bovis*.

### **Addendum**

I wrote this rather acrid review not in order to out Newport's previous or current religious beliefs or due to some personal resentment I carry against him. He can confirm we never met or communicated in any way. I wrote it because I feared, and still fear, that his book slowly but surely replaces the best academic book on the subject, Tabor and Gallagher's now admittedly quite dated *Why Waco?* and, although I waited for a long time, no other academic book on this specific subject has been published.<sup>30</sup> The danger that academics or even the general educated public would be

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<sup>29</sup> Newport goes on to say in the same article that he does not think that "the 151 Psalms 'of David' were written down as a preview of the life and career of David Koresh (which was what he made of them)" (Ibid.). Fair enough. But they were not written as a preview for the life of Jesus of Nazareth either, despite what many New Testament and other early Christian writers seem to have thought.

<sup>30</sup> A plethora of high-quality articles, some of which very critical to Newport, if usually on different grounds, have indeed been published. See, for instance, *Nova Religio* 13 (2009), which includes critical articles by Catherine Wessinger and Stuart A. Wright, as well as a response by Newport. Moreover, Wessinger took upon herself to work with the survivors and publish their memoirs, that would undoubtedly become primary material for future scholars. For detailed annotated bibliography see the World Religion and Spirituality Project: <https://wrldreels.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/PUBLISHED-Bibliography-for-The-Waco-Branch-Davidian-Tragedy-Final.pdf>

introduced to this subject by Newport's book became reality. And this book, as I argued in this review, is both academically unreliable as well as morally unacceptable. My review is thus meant to set things straight, clarify the author's bias and the reasons for it, and provide at least some of the important evidence Newport fails to mention. Once a new academic, truly historical-critical, and well-balanced book is published, my review would become superfluous. But until then, I felt I owe it to the people who died unjustly in Mt. Carmel, and to the survivors, to do my little bit to present them in better light, and clearly underline who is to blame for the tragic ending of the siege that should never have started in the first place. And that is *not* answered and *never will be* answered by the inane question "who started the fire?"

On a more personal note, Jews have been (and still are) blamed for their persecution, and, in the past at least, it was mostly because of their theological "errors". This was before the rise of liberal secularism (and *not* of "postmodernism"), when it was still "fashionable" to argue that "people's religious beliefs are wrong" and even to correct them, if needed by force. In Newport's book, which appears to be nostalgic to those good-old times, the Branch Davidian's are going through the same process. Is that a coincidence? Or perhaps their (and the SDA's) "Judaizing" way of reading scripture still annoys hard-core traditional Christians?<sup>31</sup> Others could answer

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<sup>31</sup> For some reason, Newport claims he would use the appellation "Old Testament" instead of "Hebrew Scriptures" since it is "entirely part of the mindset of the people being discussed throughout this book" (Newport 2006, 42 n. 4). A baffling statement for many reasons, among which: a. Newport himself exemplifies the utmost relevancy of the allegedly "old" testament in Davidian tradition, as when explaining where the group got the appellation "Branch Davidians" (139) or David the name "Koresh" (220, and *not* the "Old Testament" version "Cyrus"); b. The Davidians follow a

such a question much better than I do. But it is not a question an academic book should have raised in the first place.

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cannon virtually identical to the Hebrew Bible, and C. Koresh himself was actually fond of using the Hebrew appellations “Torah” and “Tanakh” (See, for instance, Negotiation transcript, March 17th, 1:45 p.m. - 2:05 p.m; the word “Tanakh” is usually rendered as “(unintelligible)” in the transcripts so one needs to actually listen to the recordings). But perhaps Newport thinks that using the phrase “Hebrew Scriptures” is once again part of that annoying “post-modern climate” that refrains from putting people who do not know how to interpret (or canonize) the Bible in their place.

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