

Waco: The Theological Rules of Engagement

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The 1997 documentary film, *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, directed by Mike McNulty, is widely regarded as a definitive expose of the violent confrontation between US federal law enforcement and the Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas, in 1993. Its sensational claims that federal agents engineered the fiery demise of the cult, and subsequently covered up their conspiracy, have contributed much to the popular understanding of 'Waco'. And it is easy to see why. Many will remember news footage of the burning compound in which eighty people perished. It has been described in a recent book on the cult as "one of the lasting images of the late twentieth century".¹ But behind this high-intensity image is the story of a cult with a distinctive eschatology that predicted a violent confrontation with U.S. law enforcement at Waco. The theology of the Branch Davidians defined their rules of engagement but its doctrines are not widely known.

Perhaps because the darker side of the cult's beliefs is largely unknown, *The Rules of Engagement*, with its sympathetic approach to the cult, has shaped many viewers' understanding of the Waco siege. Influential film critics Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert wrote,

When you see this film, what's interesting is, if you're looking for people who are unbalanced zealots, you don't find them among the Branch Davidians, you find them among the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms [ATF]. These are the people who deserve to be feared.²

No doubt the spectacle of the raid on 28 February 1993, when seventy-five heavily armed ATF agents raided the cult's compound known as Mount Carmel, helped foster their storm trooper image.

But the Branch Davidians were not passive victims. In the gun battle that broke out, four ATF agents and six Branch Davidians were killed. Many more were wounded on both sides. Harrowing footage of the raid on Mount Carmel, filmed at the scene by television cameramen who had been invited by the ATF to cover the raid, was broadcast around the world and the Branch Davidians quickly became a household name. It emerged that the ATF had raided the compound in order to search it for illegal automatic weapons. But the Branch Davidians had opened fire on the agents as they sprinted towards the front door, though later the cult insisted that the agents were the first to shoot. The raid was called off after an hour of ferocious gunfire, which had forced most of the agents to take cover behind parked cars as Branch Davidians shot at them from the second storey windows. News footage of the aftermath of the raid showed agents slowly retreating from the compound on foot or on the back of pickup trucks. Several trailer-loads of agents in bulletproof vests, wielding submachine guns, and employing military assault tactics, had been unable to subdue the Branch Davidians, who as night fell remained bunkered down in their compound.

Their mullet-haired leader, David Koresh, telephoned a Dallas radio station that night and was recorded on tape. "We are now in the fifth seal" he explained to the station manager,³ who was no doubt baffled by this pronouncement, a cryptic reference to a passage in the book of Revelation. But Koresh's opportunity to communicate his apocalyptic worldview was to be brief. FBI agents, who had assumed jurisdiction of the situation, disconnected the electrical supply to the compound the following day. Negotiators had been brought in to persuade Koresh and his followers to surrender. From 1 March the FBI would restrict the channel of

¹ Kenneth G. C. Newport: *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006, 1.

² John Dale: *The Sydney Morning Herald Magazine*, 27 February 1999. Accessed originally from <http://www.waco93.com/sydneyheraldmagazine.htm> (no longer available). See archive listing at <http://web.archive.org/web/20060319044457/http://www.waco93.com/sydneyheraldmagazine.htm>

³ KRLD tape, 28 February-1 March 1993. A copy of this audiotape is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco.

communication to the phone-line they had set up. Koresh changed his approach and for the next fifty-one days of the siege he attempted to convert the negotiators with his theology. The main reason why the siege dragged on for so long was because Koresh was trying to get the FBI agents to comprehend the situation in terms of his worldview. For them, however, it was merely unintelligible 'Bible babble'.⁴

'Theology really is life and death'

The theology of the Branch Davidians defined them as a group. The indications were there from the outset of the drama that if law enforcement were to resolve the situation it would have to engage with these beliefs. Koresh had made a 911 call during the gun battle to try to arrange a ceasefire. In his ensuing conversation with a police officer, Koresh began to explain his theology but the officer tried to steer the conversation back to the immediate situation. But 'theology really is life and death', Koresh protested.⁵ His theology baffled the FBI negotiators as surely as it did the officer manning the 911 lines; nevertheless, there were people who could have helped the FBI understand the beliefs of the Branch Davidians. Several apostates from the group had been interviewed by the ATF in the course of its investigation and one of them, Marc Breault, had been flown to Los Angeles for a meeting with agents. An FBI agent also consulted him during the siege and he explained that the Branch Davidians believed that the fifth seal was a prophecy of their martyrdom. Theology was indeed a matter of life and death for the group.

Despite the light it sheds on their perspective on the shootout and siege, the theology of the Branch Davidians does not receive much attention in *The Rules of Engagement*. Some information is revealed in excerpts from the interviews with survivors Clive Doyle and David Thibodeau. Both men appear eager to dispel the perception of cult members as brainwashed fanatics. Thibodeau insists, for example, that although he was a Branch Davidian he did not think of himself as 'a follower' of David Koresh.⁶ But the filmmakers do not probe the reasons for his commitment to the cult leader. Such information would help to explain why the Branch Davidians remained tenaciously loyal to Koresh throughout the standoff.

The answer to this question lies in their receptivity to his apocalyptic interpretation. The carnage of the initial shootout had led Koresh to declare that his followers had entered the fifth seal. Indeed, it was his ability to weave events and Biblical texts into a vivid, seamless tapestry of the End Time that underpinned his charismatic leadership in the Branch Davidians. As long as Koresh continued to exegete to the satisfaction of his followers they supported his leadership and remained in the group. They also continued to share his view of whatever situation they were in.

Most scholars who have published on the Waco siege share the view that Koresh's theology is the key to understanding his charismatic authority in the Branch Davidians.⁷ This view is consistent with the broader literature on the study of new religious movements. Some social scientists,⁸ however, have argued that an analysis of these groups that neglects psychological factors leads to a disproportionate emphasis on intellectual factors in case studies, especially in relation to these groups' attraction and retention of members. In their view, the appeal of a particular ideology or theology is not the sole motive for people who join a new religious movement.

⁴ James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher: *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1995, 108.

⁵ 911 tape, 28 February 1993. A copy of this audiotape is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University Press, Waco.

⁶ Mike McNulty: *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*, Los Angeles: COPS/Somford Productions, 1997.

⁷ See, especially, Tabor and Gallagher, *op. cit.*; Jayne Seminare Docherty: *Learning Lessons from Waco: When the Parties Bring Their Gods to the Negotiation Table*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 2001; and Kenneth G. C. Newport: *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁸ See, for example, Irving Louis Horowitz: *Science, Sin and Scholarship: The Politics of Reverend Moon and the Unification Church*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1978; and Benjamin Zablocki: 'The Blacklisting of a Concept: The Strange History of the Brainwashing Conjecture in the Sociology of Religion', *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 1(1), 1997, 96-121.

A closer examination of Koresh's theology reveals certain doctrines whose full implications for his followers' worldviews suggest that psychological factors were critical in their remaining with him. The most obvious one is his doctrine on the role of the prophet in Biblical interpretation. Its key text was Amos 3:7, "Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets." On a taped Bible study, Koresh used this text to argue that only a living prophet could correctly interpret the Bible.⁹ In practical terms, this teaching had the effect of eroding his followers' confidence in their ability to understand the Bible apart from him. They became progressively dependent on Koresh for their theology. At least one person who stayed in the cult reported that he wrestled daily with Koresh's teachings but felt ill equipped to challenge him on a theological level.¹⁰ Even those people who left the group initially lacked the confidence to critically evaluate their former leader's readings of the Bible because they had been conditioned by the idea that Biblical exegesis was his domain.

The relationship of dependence that developed between David Koresh and his followers is important for understanding their decisions to stay with him despite the privations and uncertainties of the siege. A few of them are documented as saying on negotiation tapes and a home movie, filmed inside the compound, that they believed that Biblical prophecies were being fulfilled all around them.¹¹ To create his apocalyptic scenario, Koresh had set in place a constellation of scriptural texts, the light of which illuminated for his followers the eschatological significance of events taking place at Mount Carmel. Biblical interpretation made sense of the situation for them and the sole legitimate source of it in the cult was Koresh.

"Who were these people?"

The inspiration for *The Rules of Engagement* came when producers Dan Gifford and Amy Sommer viewed the home movie shot by the Branch Davidians. All the interviewees attest to the exegetical skills of David Koresh and some of them insist that they are not staying against their will. Their testimonies had a profound effect on the producers who felt that the Davidians came across as rational people and not as the unstable fanatics that the FBI and media had portrayed them – and as much of the public no doubt regarded the cult members. "We started going, wait a minute, there's something wrong here, this is not what we were told these people were like", Dan Gifford said.¹² To counter this image, the film outlines the history of the group, prefacing this section with a segment of an interview with scholar James Tabor in which he rhetorically asks, "Who were these people?"¹³ For despite the intense media coverage at the time, few people would be familiar with the history of the Branch Davidians.¹⁴

David Koresh had assumed the leadership of the Branch Davidians in 1983, having wrested the group from the control of the elderly Lois Roden and her son George. Koresh had been a resident at Mount Carmel for only two years but in that time he had impressed many there with his enthusiasm and memory for Bible verses. Lois Roden even appointed him as her standby preacher as she was often beset by ill health. Koresh's prophetic credentials in the group were established with a series of Bible talks he began to give in September 1983 that attracted the ire of George Roden, who also coveted the leadership position. As tensions in the group rose, Roden's mother allied herself with Koresh but his soaring popularity appears to have caused her to feel insecure as she later distanced herself from him. George Roden

⁹ 'Confusion', 18 July 1987. A copy of this audiotape is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University Press, Waco.

¹⁰ FBI negotiation tape, no. 96, 9 March 1993. A copy of this audiotape is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco. The tape is a recording of a conversation between a negotiator and Steve Schneider, who was second in command to David Koresh in the Branch Davidians.

¹¹ 'The Last Will and Testament of the Branch Davidians', 8 March 1993. A copy of this video is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco.

¹² Dale, *op. cit.*

¹³ *Waco: The Rules of Engagement*.

¹⁴ The following outline of Koresh's rise to power in the Branch Davidians is drawn from my work, 'The Theology of David Koresh', PhD thesis, Department of History, The University of Melbourne, 2006. A comprehensive account is also offered in Dick J. Reavis: *The Ashes of Waco: An Investigation*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995.

obtained an Uzi submachine gun and at gunpoint tried to intimidate the residents into supporting him. Instead, they left Mount Carmel, some joining Koresh in a gypsy existence, living out of old school buses, and surviving on social security benefits and income from odd jobs.

In 1984, Koresh's band was able to purchase an undeveloped property in pinewoods near the town of Palestine, where they settled down in a makeshift camp of buses and tents. They had no running water or electricity, but the next three years would see their numbers swelled by new converts as Koresh embarked on a series of recruitment drives in California, Hawaii, Wisconsin and even Australia. All the while, George Roden fumed that he had lost his mother's following to Koresh and printed vitriolic, expletive-laden newsletters to win back support for his leadership aspirations. Instead, he alienated his few remaining sympathisers who vacated Mount Carmel, which he had since renamed 'Rodenville'. Having lost his tenants, George Roden began to rent out the cottages on the property to criminals and transients.

Koresh's success in attracting followers in contrast with Roden can be attributed to his apocalyptic theology. While both men developed theologies that were focused on their self-aggrandisement as prophetic messengers with major roles to play in the Last Days, Koresh taught his followers that they had a special role too. Beginning in 1985, he instructed them that they would eventually confront their fellow Americans in an armed conflict. It was a scenario that he fleshed out progressively over the next two years, linking various Biblical texts in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle. The location of this confrontation was to be Israel, which Koresh predicted would be invaded by American forces in the near future. In 1988 he began to ready his followers for their migration to Israel in order to preposition them for the battle, instituting target practice and obstacle courses as intensive training for the rigours of war. These preparations had the effect of conditioning the Branch Davidians to identify with their roles as apocalyptic warriors.

By the time they embarked on this training regimen, some of them had already had a taste of battle. In November 1987 Koresh had received a telephone call from George Roden who challenged him to a bizarre contest: Roden had exhumed the corpse of an elderly woman who had been buried at Mount Carmel in the 1960s and he wanted to see whether Koresh could resurrect her. If Koresh could not perform the miracle, Roden reasoned, then he would be discredited in the eyes of his followers. Such was the desperation of Roden to win over the group formerly led by his mother, who that year had succumbed to cancer. Needless to say, Koresh declined the invitation and reported it to the Sheriff's Office. The sheriff's deputies insisted they could not prosecute Roden without evidence so Koresh and seven followers, clad in camouflage clothing and armed with an array of weapons, crept onto the property to find the corpse and take photographs. Roden was alerted to their presence by his dog's barking and he started shooting at the trespassers with his Uzi submachine gun. Koresh and his men fired back and the gunfight lasted until the arrival of the sheriff's deputies, who took them into custody.

With their leader in the county jail, the Rodenville incident could have been the end of the Branch Davidians but for a courtroom drama that was as bizarre as the chain of events that had occasioned it. George Roden went to prison for contempt of court after writing letters to the judge, threatening to inflict venereal diseases on him by psychic means, and David Koresh and his men were released and had their firearms returned to them. Furthermore, Roden owed taxes on Rodenville that he was unable to pay so Koresh paid the taxes and acquired the property, reverting to its former name, Mount Carmel. Koresh posted armed guards at the front gate to deter any harassment by Roden's old tenants. In retrospect, the arming of the Branch Davidians represented a new phase in its history, where the presence of weapons interacted with Koresh's apocalyptic scenario to produce a group to whom violent confrontation with their enemies was acceptable.

This development was a far cry from their pacifistic origins in the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Started in 1930, the original Branch Davidians were a renegade group of Adventists led by Victor Houteff. Initially, they called themselves the Shepherd's Rod, after the title of Houteff's major theological work. At the outbreak of the Second World War the group officially

changed its name to the Davidian Seventh-day Adventists as affiliation with the Adventist church, though in name only, enabled its young men to be registered as conscientious objectors. The Davidians, as they were informally known, derived their name from the Christian belief that Jesus of Nazareth was the descendant of King David, an ancient Jewish monarch. The dynasty started by David had ruled Israel until its destruction by the Babylonians but Jewish prophecy held that the Messiah would come to restore their nation to its Davidic greatness. Houteff taught that Jesus would fulfil these prophecies by establishing a theocracy in Israel upon his Second Coming. Houteff planned to relocate with his followers to Israel but their migration never took place. Later, under the auspices of Ben and Lois Roden, who led the group in the 1960s and 1970s, a few families settled in Galilee but this venture did not lead to further immigration by Davidians. Over the course of five decades, the pacifist stance of the Branch Davidians, as they were called after 1960, remained unchanged. It was not until the late 1980s, after David Koresh had begun to develop his apocalyptic scenario, which revolved around a war in Israel, that the Branch Davidians abandoned their traditional pacifist stance and began preparing for combat.

Koresh's repudiation of pacifism took place in the context of a wider break with the theological continuity that had been maintained by his predecessors who led the Branch Davidians. The origins of this break lay in Koresh's development of a new persona that proved to have radical implications for the culture of the group. Successive leaders of the group had always identified themselves as prophets to the Adventist community as they were hoping to fill the role left vacant by the death of Ellen G. White, the founder of the Seventh-day Adventist Church who had been widely seen as a prophet. Victor Houteff and his successors held that the office of prophetic leadership in the person of Ellen White had distinguished the Adventist Church from lesser denominations and that without a prophetic successor to White the Church lacked divine direction. Perhaps because they had appointed themselves to the task of gathering the remnant of believers who alone would be judged worthy to be saved, Houteff's successors began to see their identities in messianic terms. Ben Roden identified himself as 'the Branch', a messianic title in the book of Zechariah, and as a result the group became known as the Branch Davidians. But Koresh went much further. In 1987 he claimed to be the Lamb who opens the book of the Seven Seals, a figure that is traditionally identified as a symbol of Jesus Christ. In Revelation 5-7 the Lamb breaks the seven seals, unleashing a series of catastrophes that presage the end of the world. The significance of Koresh's claim to be the Lamb was that these catastrophes were seen as literal events that he would have a central role in bringing to pass. Pacifism would not have been conducive to the fulfilment of these prophecies in the way that Koresh was starting to interpret them in the late 1980s.

Koresh's theology on the Seven Seals became intermeshed with his apocalyptic war scenario between 1987 and 1989. The Second Seal, which deals with war and bloodshed, in particular became a key text at this time. But his followers' expectation of violent conflict was most dramatically heightened in 1990 when Koresh changed the location of the battle with American forces from Israel to Texas. The major factor behind this development was the defection of some followers who embarked on a campaign to stop their former leader. They contacted the immigration authorities in Israel and reported that he had illegally proselytised in their country on a visit that year. The immigration authorities cancelled the application lodged by the Branch Davidians to immigrate to Israel. Koresh tried to save face with his followers and he began to predict a violent confrontation with US law enforcement at Mount Carmel. Their apocalyptic expectations were aggravated when, in March 1992, local police held a training session in a nearby field. The Branch Davidians observed the police officers rehearsing forced entries on a house on the adjacent property and they surmised that a raid on their compound was imminent. Koresh began to stockpile a massive quantity of firearms and ammunition – a spending spree that did not go unnoticed by law enforcement. The ATF started to investigate Koresh in June 1992, and when its agents eventually raided Mount Carmel on 28 February 1993, Koresh announced: "We are now in the fifth seal."

"We are now in the fifth seal"

Clearly the producers of *The Rules of Engagement* sought to present the Branch Davidians in a positive light as the documentary treats Koresh's theology of violence and his followers' acceptance of it in an uncritical way. In particular, the Branch Davidians' expectation of an armed conflict with US law enforcement is not examined. Instead, the film devotes much

screen time to justify the Branch Davidians' stockpiling of weapons. Viewers are introduced to journalist Dick Reavis who maintains that the arms buying was part of a legitimate gun business that was started by the group to provide a source of income to maintain their community. One of Koresh's followers, Paul Fatta, would visit gun shows across Texas, buy firearms and resell them later as their values increased. Koresh and Fatta eventually tried to form a partnership with a Waco gun dealer, Henry McMahon, to purchase semi-automatic AR-15s and convert the rifles into fully automatic M-16s. But McMahon was deterred by the paperwork and taxes involved and the Branch Davidians were left with the parts. But they proceeded to illegally convert the rifles into machineguns. And the massive quantity of ammunition they procured was an unusual step for a business due to the low cost and stable prices of ammo – hardly a worthwhile investment in comparison to the rifles. But the illegal conversions and the stockpiling of ammunition make sense in the context of arms build-up in preparation for a confrontation with law enforcement. The Branch Davidians did not expect to survive such a battle but that, too, was part of their apocalyptic scenario based on the Seven Seals.

Koresh's theology of the Seven Seals is very complex and a full treatment of it is beyond the scope of this paper but his exegesis of Revelation 6:9-11 – the fifth seal – may offer an explanation as to why the Branch Davidians expected martyrdom and also why Koresh did not lead them out of the compound to surrender after their shootout with the ATF and the arrival of the FBI. It may also explain why the majority of them did not leave of their own volition during the siege. If taken at face value, Koresh's use of this passage suggests they were expecting a different fate. The passage in the King James Version of the Bible reads:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.

The implication of this passage in the context of the siege is that the Branch Davidians envisaged their own martyrdom as imminent. Nevertheless, it remains unclear as to whether Koresh believed that events were locked into a predetermined course that ruled out alternative outcomes.

On 2 March Koresh said that he would leave the compound after the FBI had broadcast on radio a taped sermon that he had prepared.¹⁵ But hours later Koresh announced that God had told him to 'wait'. No additional information was given. Some scholars have speculated that Koresh's decision to wait was consistent with the command in the fifth seal to the martyrs to rest for a 'little season'.¹⁶ If so, it could mean that Koresh regarded the casualties from the gun battle as martyrs yet felt that justice would be delayed until after the rest of the Branch Davidians had been slaughtered. He would therefore wait and see whether the FBI launched an assault as the ATF had done. This theory cannot be corroborated but, because he did not surrender, it does appear that Koresh was committed to the fulfilment of his apocalyptic scenario, even if it risked the deaths of his followers. It is possible that he scrapped the surrender plan because he feared that it would derail the train of history from the tracks of prophecy.

Meanwhile, independently of the FBI, the scholars James Tabor and J. Phillip Arnold attempted to broker a deal leading to the surrender of David Koresh. A discussion between the two scholars was broadcast by a Dallas radio station on 1 April, during which they discussed the book of Revelation in a way that was calculated to interest Koresh, whom they knew was listening to the programme on his battery-powered radio. The FBI subsequently

¹⁵ The tape itself includes a statement by Koresh to this effect. See sermon tape, 2 March 1993. A copy of this audiotape is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco.

¹⁶ Tabor and Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 10.

allowed a tape of the discussion to be sent into Mount Carmel.¹⁷ Working from the premise that they knew Koresh claimed to be the figure in Revelation 10 who receives the 'little book', Tabor and Arnold emphasised verse 11 in which the recipient is commanded: "Thou must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings." Tabor and Arnold were trying to convince Koresh to believe that his work was not yet finished; therefore, the implication was that he needed to leave Mount Carmel in order to take his message to the world.¹⁸ In effect they had worked out an alternative interpretation of the fifth seal that might have persuaded Koresh to rethink his apocalyptic expectations.

This effort may have borne fruit, if it had not been for Koresh's record of broken promises to the negotiators. On 14 April, Koresh sent a letter to his attorney in which he announced his intention to surrender upon completion of a manuscript on the Seven Seals.¹⁹ The internal evidence of the uncompleted document,²⁰ which survived the fire on 19 April, stored on a disk that was carried out by a fleeing woman, suggests that Koresh had changed his approach: instead of trying to convert the FBI, he had embarked on the production of a text that might lure other potential followers. We will never know whether Koresh intended to surrender upon the completion of his manuscript if he had been granted the leeway to write it. The FBI does not appear to have been optimistic, doubtless because of the broken promise by Koresh to surrender on 2 March if the FBI broadcast one of his sermon tapes.

The failure of the negotiations between the FBI and the Branch Davidians to resolve the siege near Waco lay behind the Bureau's decision to launch its teargas assault on Mount Carmel on 19 April. This operation does seem to have precipitated the apparent self-immolation by the cult members that claimed eighty lives. A number of academics have analysed the tapes and transcripts of the negotiations in order to delineate the causes of the breakdown in communication that led to this tragedy.²¹ They argue that the FBI failed to understand the worldview of the Branch Davidians, whereas if it had the negotiators could have developed a constructive dialogue with them. The FBI insisted, however, in its post-fire report that the negotiators had ascertained during the siege that "Koresh was improvising his own theology and was completely beyond the influence of religious arguments or religious scholars."²² Due to his apparent unwillingness to engage substantively with non-theological issues, the FBI concluded that its negotiations with Koresh had reached deadlock, leaving it with no option but to deploy its tactical elements to end the siege.

If the negotiations did devolve into a zero sum game between the FBI negotiators and the Branch Davidians it was because neither party shared the same objective. The FBI wanted Koresh and his followers to surrender so their case could be processed in the courts, whereas the Branch Davidians insisted that the agents had a choice to make: either they accepted Koresh's message or God would destroy them in the time of the sixth seal. From a window someone unfurled a banner that read, "The flames await: Isaiah 13" to underscore their threat.²³ Since they were talking at cross-purposes, the FBI and the Branch Davidians did not develop a constructive dialogue with each other, leading to an impasse in the negotiations.

The US federal authorities underestimated the commitment of the Branch Davidians to the fulfilment of their apocalyptic expectations. The violent language of the Branch Davidians during the negotiations expressed their expectations of an imminent catastrophe and it would appear that, rather than surrender to the authorities, they deliberately lit the fires that destroyed their community.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁹ Letter of David Koresh to Dick DeGuerin, 14 April 1993. Quoted in Tabor and Gallagher, 15-16.

²⁰ David Koresh, 'The Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation', in Tabor & Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 191-203.

²¹ The fullest treatment is found in Docherty, *op. cit.*.

²² Edward S. G. Dennis, Jr.: 'Evaluation of the Handling of the Branch Davidian Stand-off in Waco, Texas, February 28 to April 19, 1993', U.S. Department of Justice, 8 October 1993, accessed from <http://www.usdoj.gov/05publications/wacoeval.htm>, 23/03/2009.

²³ This event occurred on 16 April 1993. See Newport, *op. cit.*, 322.

“We will run through the fire”

The Rules of Engagement challenges the official view that the Branch Davidians committed a fiery mass suicide. The makers of the film devote most of its running time to building a case against the FBI, arguing that its agents in the Bradley armoured vehicles deliberately created the conditions for a fire: gouging holes in the main building to give access to high winds that would fan the flames started by incendiary devices. Infrared film taken by an FBI surveillance aircraft is held as evidence that agents in the armoured vehicles ignited three fires in separate locations in the building. The filmmakers also allege that FBI marksmen then gunned down the Branch Davidians who fled the burning building. A hired consultant claims that the infrared film shows this happening. A British company, Vector Data Systems, however, analysed the infrared film and concluded that the ‘shooting’ was actually sunlight reflected off falling debris. The British study is cited in the Danforth Report on the cause of the fire, which was published in 2000.²⁴ But a visit to the official website for *The Rules of Engagement* will show that its makers still hold to their conspiracy theory.²⁵

Other evidence supports the official explanation for the fire, though its provenance will ensure that some remain sceptical. These are the listening devices, or bugs, that the FBI hid inside the crates of supplies that it sent into the compound for the children. The devices were first deployed on 4 April after the FBI had received legal authorisation. The recordings of these tapes are often garbled, though the brief extracts played in *The Rules of Engagement* are clear, which suggests that the tapes have been enhanced to improve clarity. The tapes record what sound like preparations to pour fuel and light a fire. The survivors claim these tapes record preparations to make Molotov cocktails with which to attack the armoured vehicles, a position shared by *The Rules of Engagement*. But only a small sample of the tapes is played in the film.

Recordings from 18 April seem to indicate that plans to torch the compound in the event of an FBI assault were well advanced. A listening device picked up a conversation in a small group in which a voice, identified as that of Scott Sonobe, remarks, ‘If we’re gonna have a fire we’d better get some fuel in here.’ Another voice, Steve Schneider’s, later says, ‘At least we’re going up. I’d rather go up in a puff of smoke than out the door and in a Bradley.’²⁶ On another tape, a group is looking out a window at the armoured vehicles driving over the property, and the conversation turns to theology. ‘We will run through the fire’, an unidentified, but clear, voice says. Another unidentified voice queries, ‘God said to do this?’ Whereupon Schneider replies, ‘That’s what David said to do and it’s fine with me.’²⁷

On 19 April, the day of the fire, the listening devices recorded voices commenting on the pouring of Coleman fuel inside the main building, including a specific mention of pouring it in a hallway. This, and someone’s query ‘Is there a way to spread fuel in here?’²⁸ appears to rule out the preparation of Molotov cocktails and suggest, rather, the dousing of the floor in fuel. In the meantime, some of the Branch Davidian children had been sent out of the compound. They were taken into care by social workers. Some of the children were videotaped at play, with a psychiatrist, Bruce Perry, present. On the video, shot before 19 April, Perry asks an eight-year-old child about a picture she had drawn of Mount Carmel in flames, with some steps leading up into the sky:

And I said, ‘what’s that?’ She said ‘that’s what’s going to happen.’ And I said, ‘well what is that?’ She said, ‘that’s a fire. There’s an explosion.’ ‘And what are these steps?’ ‘Those are steps up to Heaven.’ And I said, ‘well, what does that mean?’ And she said, ‘Well, you’ll find out.’²⁹

²⁴ John C. Danforth, ‘Final Report to the Deputy Attorney General Concerning the 1993 Confrontation at the Mt. Carmel Complex Waco, Texas’, 8 November 2000. A copy of the Final Report is available at <http://www.waco93.com/Danforth-finalreport.pdf> (no longer available). Alternate location of report <http://www.cesnur.org/testi/DanforthRpt.pdf>, accessed 23/03/2009.

²⁵ The official website is <http://www.waco93.com>.

²⁶ Tape SA73-1. Quoted in Newport, 295.

²⁷ Tape SA72-28. Quoted in Newport, 296.

²⁸ Tape 3/5. Quoted in Newport, 288.

²⁹ Quoted in Newport, *op. cit.*, 299.

The world did on the 19 April 1993.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, therefore, it seems that the apocalyptic theology of David Koresh is the key to understanding the tragedy of 'Waco'. His theology defined the 'ultimate concern' for the Branch Davidians: the establishment of the kingdom of God. This could only take place after their deaths by fire. The evidence indicates that the Branch Davidians torched the main complex at Mount Carmel because the FBI assault threatened their ultimate concern. An overarching theme for the end of the siege lies in the 'pragmatics of failure' as outlined by Catherine Wessinger, a scholar of violent apocalyptic groups. She observes, 'if methods to achieve the ultimate concern are failing, believers may shift to using other methods, which may be either peaceful or violent'.³⁰ On 14 April Koresh's plan on how to end the standoff – writing a manuscript on the Seven Seals before he surrendered – was peaceful but on 19 April his method would be catastrophically violent.

The decision to torch the compound was probably an act of desperation. Although the FBI initiated the confrontation on 19 April, using armoured vehicles to tear holes in the main complex through which to fire teargas canisters, the Branch Davidians' gunfire and self-immolation had been planned in the event of such a move to end the siege by force as the recordings from the FBI listening devices reveal. The FBI was seeking to arrest the Branch Davidians, who no doubt viewed the gassing operation as a threat to their ultimate concern, which demanded their martyrdom. The fifth seal had to be closed in order to open the sixth seal. Otherwise, mass arrests and lengthy prison sentences would have been an ignominious end for the Branch Davidians.

Their anxiety about the success, indeed the veracity, of Koresh's apocalyptic scenario is also evident in comments by Steve Schneider, who was the Branch Davidian that the FBI talked with the most during the siege. He had spoken to a negotiator about his belief that the siege fulfilled prophecies in the book of Nahum,³¹ a text that Koresh linked in its specifics to the fifth seal. But Schneider had earlier told another negotiator that he was constantly wrestling with Koresh's teaching and gave the impression that he was not fully committed to it.³² If what he said about other Branch Davidians feeling the same way as him was true then it indicates that they were not as eschatologically confident as they might have appeared. Perhaps they were all looking for confirmation that their acceptance of Koresh's theology had been worth the personal sacrifices, that the future that he predicted was becoming their present reality. Waco, for many, seemed to be proof that prophecy was being fulfilled all around them. Yet as the FBI's armoured vehicles closed in to end the siege, the murder-suicides by most of the Branch Davidians may have been their last desperate bid to keep prophecy from being derailed, by closing the fifth seal with their lives.

³⁰ Catherine Wessinger: *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven's Gate*, New York, Seven Bridges Press, 2000, 272.

³¹ FBI negotiation tape, no. 105, 10 March 1993. A copy of this audiotape is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco.

³² FBI negotiation tape, no. 96, 9 March 1993. A copy of this audiotape is held in The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco.