

2009

# Review of "Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother," By Bonnie Haldeman

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Ashcraft, W. Michael, "Review of "Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother," By Bonnie Haldeman" (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1148.  
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*Memories of the Branch Davidians: The Autobiography of David Koresh's Mother.* By Bonnie Haldeman, as told to Catherine Wessinger. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007. xiii + 199 pp. Photographs, notes, works cited, index. \$29.95 paper.

In 1993 federal government agents besieged and then attacked the compound of buildings at Mount Carmel, outside of Waco, Texas, that housed members of a religious movement called the Branch Davidians (a splinter group of the Seventh-day Adventists), led by Vernon Howell, who renamed himself David Koresh. Catherine Wessinger, a noted scholar of cults or new religions, has produced much of the essential scholarship that has appeared in the wake of the Waco disaster. This book is part of her ongoing contribution to our understanding of Waco.

Wessinger interviewed Bonnie Haldeman extensively in 2004, resulting in the present volume, which includes fifty-five pages of endnotes containing copious information. Reading the autobiography and endnotes together provides a crash course on what happened at Waco. Halderman speaks as a Texas woman, born in 1944 to poor people and living most of her life as one of those poor herself. She had an eighth-grade education until midlife, when she attended nursing school. She was familiar with Seventh-day Adventist beliefs and practices but usually orbited just beyond them until her son became an avid practitioner of a radicalized splinter group from that tradition. She delighted in spending time with children and grandchildren, eating good food, getting a decent shower or bath, having enough money to pay the bills, keeping her husband (if possible) from drinking too much and physically abusing her, and enjoying the friendship of other women, both older and younger than herself. Her values were those of someone of her time and place: work hard, save money, raise children with discipline and love, do the best you can to overcome adversity, learn to live without the luxuries of life but be grateful for those you have.

Haldeman's understanding of her son is both intuitive and incomplete. She loves him unconditionally, knowing him as a parent knows a child whom she has raised from infancy. Yet his teenage and adulthood struggles, apparently of an emotional nature as well as a spiritual one, are mostly a mystery to her. She says often that Koresh went through dark periods, but claims she does not understand them, and there is no way of knowing whether this is true or whether during the interviews she kept her opinions about them to herself. Her autobiography, in short, does not provide insight into the character of David Koresh's complex personality. Not a self-reflective person herself, she offers little reflection about her son.

The book does however implicitly address a question that, in one form or another, many people ask about the Branch Davidians: how could seemingly normal people embrace the weird theology and isolationist lifestyle of Koresh and his movement? The answer to this, as to similar questions about those who join any religious movement deemed marginal or bizarre by the mainstream, is that people like Haldeman make their way in their own manner according to their own personalities. In her case, her son was the teacher, and even though she did not understand much of what he said in his Bible studies, she trusted him to know his own mind and the will of God. Her involvement with the Branch Davidians was, for her, as natural a part of her life story as any other component of that story.

Haldeman's account can be read as the witness of a Branch Davidian who was neither a committed core member nor an ex-member with an agenda. In that respect, it is a refreshingly candid unveiling of a community of religionists still regarded by most outsiders as alien and deviant.

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