

Shepherd's Rod

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Milton Hook, Ed.D. (Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, the United States). Hook retired in 1997 as a minister in the Greater Sydney Conference, Australia. An Australian by birth Hook has served the Church as a teacher at the elementary, academy and college levels, a missionary in Papua New Guinea, and as a local church pastor. In retirement he is a conjoint senior lecturer at Avondale College of Higher Education. He has authored *Flames Over Battle Creek*, *Avondale: Experiment on the Dora*, *Desmond Ford: Reformist Theologian*, *Gospel Revivalist* the *Seventh-day Adventist Heritage Series*, and many magazine articles. He is married to Noeleen and has two sons and three grandchildren.

The group of people commonly known as Shepherd's Rod were a breakaway from the Seventh-day Adventist Church, 1930 through 1962, later splintering into several manifestations centered at Waco, Texas. They chose to call themselves the General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists. Their initial leader was Victor Houteff.

Beginnings Under Victor Houteff

Victor Tasho Houteff was born in Bulgaria in 1885 and raised in the Greek Orthodox faith. He migrated to the United States in 1907 and was baptized as a Seventh-day Adventist in 1919. By 1930 he was a Sabbath School superintendent in California and used his position to promote his personal views about the 144,000 of the Apocalypse. His disruptive nature brought about his dismissal from membership. This action provoked a verbal vendetta against the Seventh-day Adventist Church leadership in particular with him declaring God's wrath would destroy them.

Church officials gave Houteff a hearing in 1934 and concluded his views were erroneous. In May 1935 a group of eleven followers, including children, transferred to Waco, Texas, where they purchased property that they called the Mount Carmel Centre. Houteff published at least three pamphlets outlining his beliefs, the chief publication being titled *The Shepherd's Rod*. The other two were *The Symbolic Code*, which described the manner in which he interpreted biblical prophecies and another titled *Timely Greetings*. He believed their stay in Waco would be short because their numbers would swell to 144,000 and then the entire group would assemble in Palestine as a theocratic kingdom to preach the Loud Cry. Those converts who responded to the Loud Cry were expected to join the 144,000 in Palestine to witness the Second Coming.

Houteff married Florence Marcella Hermanson, who was thirty-four years younger than himself and a devotee of the Davidian faith. Houteff died in Waco on February 5, 1955, and Florence assumed leadership of the group. Approximately three years later the Mount Carmel Centre was sold and a larger property was purchased a short distance from the Waco township.

The group came to believe that they would be supernaturally transported to Palestine on April 22, 1959. For this reason several hundred adherents gathered at their new premises to await the event. They had sold their farms or businesses or resigned from their employment. They publicly touted the event as one that would prove or disprove their faith. The event did not take place despite their many prayer meetings pleading for God to vindicate them.

Throughout June/July/August 1959 representatives of the Davidians met with some SDA church officials to discuss matters. After some reflection the Davidian leadership wrote letters to their adherents on December 12, 1961, and on January 16, 1962, admitting their errors of biblical interpretation. To their credit they tended their resignations in March 1962 and the General Association of Davidian Seventh-day Adventists officially ceased to exist on March 11, 1962.²

The Davidian Apocalyptic Time-Line

The year of Houteff's dismissal from the SDA church, 1930, was pivotal to the Davidian time-line of world events, for they claimed that the spirit of prophecy, allegedly lost when Ellen White died, was restored in Houteff at that time. This was partly based on the assertion that the Reformation began in 1500 A.D. with Luther discovering a Bible. The period of 430 years, being Israel's sojourn in Egypt (Exodus 12:40), was arbitrarily chosen to add to 1500 AD in order to reach the date 1930.³

A detailed end-time scenario was outlined under the influence of Florence Houteff. The Davidian prophecy was based on the 1260 days (Revelation 11). The time period was interpreted as literal days even though Houteff had earlier applied the time symbolically to the period 538 A.D. to 1798 A.D. The literal 1260 days was alleged to begin on November 9, 1955, when a notice was mailed out from Waco announcing that God would vindicate or condemn the Davidians at the end of the 1260 days. The vindication would take the form of a mighty earthquake, a literal shaking time, during which all Seventh-day Adventists would be slain. At the same time Houteff would be resurrected, and the theocratic Kingdom of God would be established in Palestine. This event was forecast to occur on April 22, 1959. This theory, cobbled together from various apocalyptic passages in Scripture, accounts for the gathering at Waco of approximately eight hundred Davidians in anticipation of their removal to Palestine and the vindication of their movement. The non-event was a great disappointment for them.⁴

Great emphasis had been placed on Revelation 14:7, a message that the Davidians indicated was encapsulated in their interpretation of end-time events. They called it The Loud Cry. It was to be preached when they arrived in Palestine.⁵

A Revival of Sorts

After the disappointment of 1959 the Davidian organization splintered into several groups, commonly called Branch Davidians. A power struggle took place between Florence Houteff and an adherent named Benjamin Roden. In 1962 they fought it out in court. Roden won control of the Waco estate and for the next fifteen years led a group along a different theological path.⁶ Benjamin Lloyd Roden was of Jewish heritage, born in Oklahoma on January 5, 1902. He was married to Lois Irene Scott, who was born on September 2, 1905.⁷ Roden taught his adherents that Christians should observe the Hebrew festivals. When he died in October 1978, Lois assumed control of the group. She claimed to have seen a vision in which she was told the Holy Spirit is the feminine person in the Trinity. She launched a periodical titled *SHEkinah* in which she promoted the theory. George, son of Benjamin and Lois, also claimed visionary powers and posed as the young prophet of Isaiah 8.⁸

Vernon Howell

Vernon Wayne Howell was born in Houston on August 17, 1959, and later married Rachel Jones, who was eleven years younger than himself.⁹ It was about 1981 that Howell began working as a handyman at the Waco estate. Two years earlier he was baptized into the SDA faith but was disfellowshipped soon after when it became obvious his views were inconsistent with Seventh-day Adventism. Howell formed a sexual liaison with Lois Roden. Friction on a number of fronts developed between Howell and Lois's son, especially their claims to divine inspiration. Howell moved a little further east to the ironically-named town of Palestine.¹⁰

When Howell moved east he took with him several teenage girls he regarded as his wives. The friction between Howell and George Roden did not abate despite the kilometers separating them. In November 1987 they had a shoot-out. They were arrested but the trial resulted in a hung jury. Roden, however, was imprisoned for another offense, and while he was incarcerated Howell moved back into the Waco estate. Howell transformed the premises into an armed fortress. He taught that he was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was the reincarnated Christ. This led him to claim that he was the antitypical David who would restore the Davidic kingdom in Israel. Likewise, he claimed he was the Root of David (Revelation 5:5) and the only person entitled to open and explain the contents of the Seven Seals. For this reason he changed his name to David Koresh, the latter name being Hebrew for Cyrus and a reference to Cyrus the Great who allowed the Jews to return to Israel!¹¹ It was becoming obvious that not only was Howell sexually promiscuous, but he also manifested symptoms of megalomania and was prone to flights of fancy.

Howell went on recruiting tours to SDA churches in England, Australia, and throughout the United States including Hawaii. He was charismatic and shrewd, targeting new or disaffected church members. He posed as one with a gentle and amiable nature who had fresh understandings of the Scriptures and simply wanted to rid the world of its ills. In August 1990 police raids were made on his premises in an attempt to serve arrest warrants about his reported sex with under-age girls. Court cases ensued during 1991 and 1992, at least one resulting in the release of a young woman.¹²

In response to government intervention, Howell adopted a siege mentality that bristled with guns. The federal police came to confiscate his weapons, and a shoot-out erupted with both sides losing lives. Having lost lives the federal agencies mounted a lengthy siege and later stormed the premises with tear gas. Fire destroyed the buildings. Nine members escaped the flames. It was reported seventy-six Branch Davidians lost their lives, a third of them said to be Koresh's children from his various wives. Koresh himself was later found among the ruins with a self-inflicted gunshot to the head.¹³

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2. Note: The section "Beginnings under Victor Houteff" is a merger of two sources, i.e., W[alter] E. Murray, "False Claims of Shepherd's Rod Exposed," *ARH*, June 23, 1960, 6-9 and Robert L. Odom, "The Shepherd's Rod Organization Disbands," *ARH*, May 17, 1962, 6-8.

3. Ibid.
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