

THE RESOLUTION OF THE BRANCH DAVIDIAN DILEMMA

J. Phillip Arnold
Reunion Institute

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During the fifty-one-day standoff with government authorities in 1993, the Branch Davidian religious group at Mt. Carmel near Waco, Texas faced a difficult dilemma. They and their leader, David Koresh, were forced to choose: either surrender to law enforcement immediately or obey their religious beliefs, which instructed them to wait for God to reveal when to surrender. Koresh and most of the community decided to “obey God rather than man” as Acts 5:35 puts it.¹

About April 14, after nearly six weeks of waiting, Koresh received a revelation declaring the waiting period was to be ended; it was time to surrender. All that remained for Koresh to do was to put his interpretation of the seven seals of Revelation in writing and deliver it to his attorney and to specific religious scholars. Once done, he and the community would exit Mt. Carmel, peacefully give up and go to trial. This resolution of their dilemma rested on their belief that the divinely appointed time had come for Koresh to write the most important explanation of salvation in world history. If the authorities would wait until it was written, they would prove themselves and the world worthy of this new revelation, and the standoff would end in peaceful resolution.

Regrettably, the FBI and Washington leaders had no understanding of this master plan and had no “worldview translators” on site to interpret it. Therefore, authorities failed to take advantage of this breakthrough and, instead, interrupted the writing of the message on Monday, April 19 by assaulting Mt. Carmel with CS gas and collapsing some of the structure itself in the vain hope that

the community would obey man rather than God. Instead of recognizing that Koresh had found a way to resolve the dilemma, the authorities put the community in the position of radicalizing their commitment to God by preferring a fiery death to disobedient surrender. In this way, the authorities precipitated the fire that destroyed the community.²

In order to understand more clearly the dynamics involved in this tragedy, it is necessary to focus on the period from April 1 to April 19 because specific events occurred then which provide the key to explaining the dilemma and what should have been its resolution. These events include: the unexpected interjection of non-Davidian religion scholars into the dynamics of the Branch Davidian worldview; the subsequent revelation to Koresh to give up and come out peacefully; the release of four “inspired messages” which offered a new biblical revelation of the meaning of salvation; and the perceived rejection of that revelation and the opening by Koresh of the catastrophic sixth seal of the book of Revelation.

The method used in this analysis involves “worldview translation,” meaning that the interpreter utilizes the “language game” employed by the subjects (Branch Davidians) in order to create “participation” in the mythological landscape on which the subjects dwell. By entering into that world, the translator suspends her own worldview with its cultural baggage and lives within the phenomena inherent within what it means to be David Koresh and his community. Through a creative act of imagination, we are transported into their worldview and empowered to comprehend their reasons for their actions when faced with the phenomena that they were experiencing at that time. But, we must be forewarned that using this method can be disconcerting—even *threatening*. This method insists we loose the moorings of our own sacred vessel, suspending some of our preconceptions, and enter into an alien world inhabited by strange concepts and distasteful ideas. In short, we are challenged to deconstruct, temporarily, some of our

own worldview in order to reconstruct the worldview of others—in this case, David Koresh and the Branch Davidians. If this article succeeds, it is because it enables the reader to enter into the mind and thought-world of David Koresh, the thirty-three year old Messianic figure whom government authorities characterized as a sociopath and con man; but whom others considered a mystic who received direct revelations from God.³

The phone conversations between the authorities and the Branch Davidians recorded over the fifty-one days of negotiations are primary source materials, along with others, which clarify the worldview of Koresh and his followers.⁴ These sources demonstrate the group to be a religious community, whose ultimate concern consists in obeying God as he is understood through the Bible and their tradition, including the teachings of their prophet figure, David Koresh. Throughout that period, the hundreds of hours of negotiation tapes show the Branch Davidians talked about the simple pleasures of eating good food, loving their children, enjoying fishing and sports, and expressing their fears and doubts, as well as their deep religious faith. Time and again they explained they were there for theological reasons. From their point of view, they were in the position they were in because they were following God's will as shown in their study of the Bible and through the inspired teachings of their prophet Koresh.

In his 2006 work, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect*, Kenneth Newport correctly observes that the Branch Davidian movement and its predecessors, the Davidian Seventh Day Adventists, the Shepherd's Rod, and the Adventist movement, all pointed to a future day when an eschatological, apocalyptic crisis moment would come to this community.⁵ They all preached and believed the day would soon come when the heavens would open and the books of Daniel and Revelation would stand in literal fulfillment for

their people. Nevertheless, we will see this does *not* mean, as Newport implies, the holocaust of April 19 was the inevitable outcome of the standoff between the FBI and the Branch Davidians.

With the ATF raid and gunshot deaths of several members on Sunday, February 28, the Branch Davidians thought the apocalyptic day anticipated by their tradition had finally dawned. They believed the scriptures predicted the very events that were transpiring in their community at Mt. Carmel from the first day of the ATF raid on that Sunday. They understood the words of Jesus in Mathew 24:42 (“Watch therefore”⁶) to mean they should watch world events and interpret them according to the scriptures Jesus pointed to in the book of Daniel when the “abomination of desolation” would “stand in the holy place.”⁷ They interpreted those Sunday events, according to the biblical text and under the guidance of their “inspired prophet” Koresh, to mean that the time had come for many of the end-time prophecies to be fulfilled in their own back yard at Mt. Carmel center outside Waco.

The original plan made between the authorities and Koresh was for the community to come out on March 2. David admits he originally agreed to do just that, but received a direct unexpected revelation from God that he had to “wait.” The authorities may not have believed that he heard a voice or had a revelation, but that is what he and the Branch Davidians believed. Special revelations had come to David Koresh many times in his life, and he obeyed them without reservation. And so it was then; whether law enforcement agents were outside his door was irrelevant. He believed he had received a divine revelation to “wait.” Believing that it came from God, he had no choice but to obey it. Although waiting would set in motion a string of circumstances which would create suffering for him and his community, it was a cup which could not pass from him. Even Koresh did not know exactly what God had him waiting for. He would not know what God had in mind until about April 14 when God informed him that he would now

be allowed to write a new revelation of world salvation, after which he would surrender to authorities. Understandably, this was disconcerting to the authorities who had thought they had a commitment from Koresh to surrender in March. Without the benefit of worldview translators equipped to translate Koresh's religious experiences, the authorities concluded that he was a liar and a con man.⁸

The familiar story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane serves as a heuristic touchstone enabling us to better participate in the Davidian dilemma. We read that after the Last Supper, Jesus went out to Gethsemane, where he prayed, "If it is possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will."⁹ Jesus faced a dilemma. His humanity begged for a respite; his divine mission demanded he fulfill what he was called to do. He could have simply come out of the Garden "compound" and surrendered to the authorities at that moment instead of waiting till they came upon him with force, arresting him and later killing him. Instead, he obeyed God.

But, unlike Jesus, David Koresh got a reprieve shortly after Passover in April. A second revelation around April 14 informed him the waiting period was to be ended. The time had come to give up to authorities. He had been given permission from God to put his message in written form and surrender to the FBI, and they could do whatever they wanted with him. The authorities would not have to employ force after all.¹⁰

The key to understanding the Davidian dilemma, and what could have been its peaceful resolution, resides in focusing on the period from April 1 to April 19 when events were in motion that led David Koresh to believe that the "waiting period" had ended. Since March 2, Koresh was convinced that a great revelation from God was coming, but that he had to wait for it. Koresh and the community remained in contact with the authorities through telephone and occasional face to

face meetings, repeatedly telling them that they were “waiting” for God to give them the word to leave Mt. Carmel.

As Passover approached in early April, the community looked for an “exodus” from the standoff. Suddenly, during that Passover week, Koresh believed that he received the anticipated revelation from God to end the standoff peacefully. This meant that the “waiting period” was to be ended; the word from God had come. Not only had God told the Branch Davidians to surrender, he had also granted Koresh authority to rewrite the message of salvation for the entire world in a new and astounding way. Koresh says he was instructed by God to surrender as soon as he wrote down the message of the seven seals so that it would be securely in place no matter what happened to him after he and his followers exited Mt. Carmel.

For Koresh this meant he was given the greatest opportunity any prophet ever received. He could write the meaning of the seven seals of the book of Revelation--a message he believed the world had been waiting to receive for thousands of years. The time had come; the difficulties of the long waiting period had been worth it. Humanity would now be blessed with the greatest explanation of the meaning of life and of salvation ever written. The hidden mysteries of the Bible would now be revealed.¹¹

When David Koresh spoke of interpreting the seven seals of Revelation 6, he did not mean what most of us would mean: merely going to the chapter and examining the summary details in context one by one (the horseman having a bow, and so on). David Koresh had much more in mind. For him, the seven seals were short summaries of all the scriptures that had gone before. As he read in Revelation 10:5-7, the book of Revelation was to be understood according to the prophets.

And the angel whom I saw standing on sea and land lifted up his right hand to heaven and swore by him who lives for ever and ever, who created heaven and what is in it, the earth and what is in it, and the sea and what is in it, that there should be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.¹²

So from David Koresh's point of view, to understand the first seal, or any other seal, you had to understand the prophets in the Bible first. So when he looked at the First Seal, he then searched for every reference in the Old Testament to a white horse, a horseman, and bows and arrows, because these would flesh out the meaning of the white horse rider of the First Seal in Revelation. This is not an unreasonable methodology; after all, modern commentaries often refer to passages from the Hebrew Bible to shed light on passages in Revelation.¹³ They do so for a very good reason. The author of Revelation was a Jewish Christian writing around 100 AD, and as consistent with this, he brought to his effort a deep familiarity with Hebrew Scripture and earlier Christian tradition. Accordingly, the author looked to references in the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, among other books in the Old Testament. David Koresh sought to follow the same precedent in interpreting the seven seals. In this way, he attempted to harmonize the entire Bible in the light of the seven seals. Once he connected the dots, he would explain the esoteric meaning of each seal, showing how it affected human destiny.

The extraordinary revelation David Koresh believed he received during Passover in early April 1993 informed him that the waiting period had served its purpose, and now God was about to give the world through him the true meaning of the entire Bible! When Koresh spoke about the meaning of the seven seals, he included the meaning of Genesis, Exodus, the Four Gospels—all of the biblical books. He was about to unfold the whole Bible in a new way which would give

humanity a new, deeper, and clearer revelation. Although the FBI assaulted the community before Koresh could complete his writing, some of it was completed over that final weekend, and it was smuggled out safely by Ruth Riddle who had typed Koresh's handwritten copy on a word processor disc.¹⁴

Immediately upon receiving this revelation, Koresh began to write four communiqués. The first three of these messages were sent to the FBI, and the fourth was brought out by Riddle; they are sequential in nature when read contextually. I have named each of them as follows:

The Judgment Message

The Hand Message

The Exodus Message

The Seal Message

The Judgment Message, written on April 10, reveals the coming judgment on mankind if the forthcoming revelation to be presented by Koresh in the seven seals is rejected. Similar to some Old Testament passages where Yahweh speaks in first person and similar to direct address in the Koran, here God speaks in the first person: "I offer you My wisdom. I offer you My sealed secrets. How dare you turn away My invitations of mercy? I know your sins and your iniquities. None are hid from Me. When will you ever fear and be wise? Your only savior is My truth. My truth is the seven seals." The letter continues with warnings of impending judgment if the new revelation of salvation is rejected. It is signed "Yahweh." From time to time David Koresh received what he believed were direct revelations from God which directed his decision-making. Other mystics have made similar claims, but what is extraordinary in this letter is that it purports to have God speak directly through Koresh's letter in the first person. God's message in this first introductory letter is that there is a special revelation of the seals coming by which the world will be judged.¹⁵ This

letter must be seen as the first stepping stone leading to the revelation of the hidden meaning of the entire Bible begun in the fourth writing: the *Seal Message*.

The second letter also comes from “Yahweh” on April 11. I call it the *Hand Message* because biblical passages about the “hand” of the Lord repeatedly are referred to in which the Lord “lifts” and “swears by” his hand.”¹⁶ Koresh associates these “hand” passages with the book of the seven seals that is in the hand of the Lord in the book of Revelation. So the Hand Message is an explanation of how the judgment described in the first letter may be avoided: by getting and understanding the seven seals which are in the hand of the Lord. But, who is the only one able to open this book in the hand of God? The book of Revelation says only the Lamb of God can open the book and reveal the seven seals. For the Branch Davidians, no one but David Koresh had shown this ability to explain each of the seven seals in the light of the Old Testament prophets as they believed Revelation 10:5-7 demands.¹⁷ By believing the new message of salvation based on the forthcoming Seal Message, this letter promises escape from the judgment decreed in the first letter.

On April 14 Koresh wrote the third message explaining how he and his community would leave—make an “exodus” from—Mt. Carmel and surrender to the authorities. This message, which I call the *Exodus Message*, follows after the first two messages point to impending judgment and the crucial importance of the seven seals. The third letter is not from Yahweh; it is from Koresh and shows what would happen if the authorities would heed the Yahweh letters and allow the seven seals to be explained to the world for the first time in written form. In this letter Koresh says he has asked the Lord his whole life, repeatedly, if he could write down the message of the seven seals, but the Lord has told him no. Now during this waiting period, the Lord has told him yes. Koresh believed God had told him that the time had arrived to write the message of salvation revealed in the seals so that the entire world could have it. He believed that never before had this

entire picture of salvation been available for mankind. It was time to write the message and surrender to the authorities. After the message was written, Koresh says it would not matter what happened physically to him and the community because of the magnitude of the new revelation. He told the negotiators he definitely would come out once he had written the message. He said he was ready to be put in jail or in a cage, even to eat bananas if they wanted him to. The Exodus Message promised he would write the message of the seven seals, and then give it to Dick DeGuerin, his attorney, who would then give it to scholars James Tabor and Phil Arnold. Once we had it, we were to provide this sacred text to scholars throughout the world.¹⁸

Koresh had come to this “revelation” during the Passover season after he heard James Tabor and me on Dallas radio KGBS discussing the meaning of the seven seals. We had gotten a telephone tip from CNN that the FBI was going to assault Mt. Carmel with gas. Knowing that the Branch Davidians would perceive this threatening move as a fulfillment of prophecies in which the people of God are destroyed by the enemies of God, and since we had no power to convince the authorities otherwise, we decided to circumvent them and make a last ditch effort to save lives. Calling Ron Engelman of KGBS, we asked if we could have most of his talk show on Thursday, April 1 to talk directly to Koresh and his followers who listened to his program every morning. To his credit, Ron agreed, turning his show over to us, since we thought it “would save lives.” On that Thursday, April 1 many Davidians gathered around the radio to listen to our program.

As scholars of religion, our purpose was not to argue with David Koresh or to try to persuade him that his views were “wrong.” Our method was to enter into his worldview and engage in a dialogue with him after granting some of his presuppositions. Once engaged in that “mythological exchange” we hoped to offer creative suggestions as to how that worldview might be malleable.

Part of the “malleability” that we focused on was the length of time Koresh had to complete his eschatological mission according to the seals. Even granting him his presuppositions, there was still room to discuss the exact chronological sequences involved in his prophetic scenario. For example, Revelation 6:11 says that the people slain in the fifth seal (for the Branch Davidians, those members killed on February 28) were to rest for a “little season,” after which the catastrophe of the sixth seal would come crashing down.¹⁹ Tabor and I gently suggested that the “little season” might not be the short time between February 28 and April 1, but might be up to three and a half years, based on references in Daniel and Revelation to “time, times, and half a time.”²⁰ We also pointed to Revelation 10:11 where the Lamb is told that he will have to “prophesy again” to the world.²¹ We suggested that Koresh had not yet really prophesied to the entire world as this passage demanded; therefore more time was needed to complete his mission.

One of the most telling points that set dominoes in motion with game changing consequences was that we told Koresh that spokesmen for God often *write* their messages from prison, as seen in the case of the Apostle Paul who wrote some of his most important letters from prison. In retrospect, it appears that our mentioning the need to write his message may have triggered Koresh’s inspiration for the revelation he received shortly thereafter that told him to write down his message. But the crucial difference was that we had suggested surrendering *prior* to writing, but his revelation instructed him to write first, surrender afterwards. Unintentionally and unknown to us, interjecting ourselves into the equation in an attempt to save lives altered the mythology at work in the unfolding situation.²²

We know David Koresh heard us because the FBI granted his attorney Dick DeGuerrin permission to take on April 4 a cassette copy of the recording of the program and to hand it to him personally. Koresh no doubt believed that our understanding of his interpretation of the seven seals

was incomplete, but was pleased that a couple of scholars had shown “a serious interest in these things.”²³ From inside his biblical universe, Koresh thought God had found a way to leapfrog the blockade that the FBI had placed between him and the outside world of religious experts. For him, it would have seemed an answer to prayer that religion scholars had found a way to “parachute” into his blockaded community and enter into dialogue with him regarding the meaning of the seven seals. This was the language game that Koresh and the Davidians spoke—a language unknown to FBI tactical persons and negotiators, nor to their behavior psychologists. It was the Rosetta Stone to the Branch Davidian symbolic universe.

During the week long Passover season, beginning April 6, Koresh was “inspired” to create a narrative that would integrate his surrender with the unexpected intervention of the outside religion scholars and the attorneys in a way that would fit his biblical understanding of prophecy. These ruminations during Passover week gave birth to the four messages beginning on April 10. As we have seen, in the first two, God in first person warns of judgment and shows the way of salvation. The third one specifies how the crisis will be resolved: David will write the message of the seals and then surrender. The fourth communiqué is the *Seal Message* in which he begins to interpret the seals themselves. It is composed of a poem, an introduction, and the interpretation.

Contrary to expectations, Koresh did not present an interpretation of “end-time events” along the lines of Hal Lindsay or the authors of the *Left Behind* series.²⁴ There was no attempt to apply the book of Revelation to the geopolitical realities of the modern world as is so often done in popular works. In fact, the Seal Message quietly and gently commences with a love poem followed by emotive language about the marriage of the Lamb to His bride. At first blush, one wonders what was so important to Koresh about these images. And there it stood for over twenty years; but returning now to the Seal Message, the monumental importance bursts through the text.

In his exposition of the first seal, Koresh claims that the book of Revelation is a revelation of Jesus Christ. He does not mean a revelation from Christ, but one revealing who and where Christ is today. His revelation of the seven seals is a “self-disclosure.” It is a personal experience between the initiate and the Christ who is revealing himself in David Koresh. It is a revelatory disclosure of *Christ’s end-time presence in David Koresh*. His written explanation of the seals would offer the reader an experience of the Christ, a special *intimacy* which he calls “the *marriage* of the Lamb.” God was using the events at Waco to reveal who and where Christ was in the end times.

For Koresh, the seven seals show how the heavenly Christ has appeared through history, descending upon certain people and prophets through history—most significantly on Jesus Christ, but also perhaps on other biblical figures such as Melchizedek, Enoch, and Elijah, and in these last days upon “the Lamb.” So Koresh believed that the “Christ spirit” comes upon certain chosen people and “adopts” them as messianic figures. Such “Christologies” were called “adoptionistic” in early Christian history. Advocates of this view referred to the *Logos* or the Son of God descending on people as “the Christ hastening through the ages,” appearing here and there and bringing forth truth and revelation.²⁵ Koresh did not think he was “Jesus the Jew” or “Jesus Christ”—but he did think that the “Christ-spirit,” the *Logos*, had descended upon him in a very special way. His evidence for this claim rested on the fact that he believed, along with his followers, that he could explain the seven seals, something scripture affirmed only the Lamb of God could do.

Once his presuppositions were granted, Koresh would support his case with his superlative oral gifts. His delivery created a sense of presence at the biblical events he would recount in the first person, as if the Christ spirit in him was recalling those events from personal experience. The scenes would be fleshed out in graphic detail; biblical passages would be delivered with near-

photographic precision. This was no dry exegesis of arcane texts. Koresh's word created an aural-oral world in which intimacy with the characters described and the speaker himself penetrated the hearers. As Koresh went further into his portrayal of the mysteries of the marriage of the Lamb, his voice might change, and the female voice of the Spirit would sometimes emerge. With time the full revelation in written form would enable the believer to consummate the "marriage of the Lamb"²⁶ when "thine eyes shall see the King in his beauty."²⁷ As a musician and songwriter, David had an artistic, even romantic, side which is evidenced in the tender poem he wrote for the first seal. It is about two lovebirds captured by a hunter and put in separate cages from which they seek to escape to resume their love. Through the work of the seven seals, the love birds can escape and reunite in the marriage of the Lamb.²⁸

Importantly, Koresh's revelation of the seals not only sought support for his identity as the Lamb from the book of Revelation, but from the writings of the Old Testament. Locating other passages that predicted a figure that would bring the people of God salvation, Koresh attempted to consolidate them into one final end-time figure. He saw in Isaiah 45:1 a prediction that a messianic figure named "Cyrus" (Koresh in Hebrew) would come to save God's people.²⁹ This person is called in Isaiah 45 the "messiah"³⁰ of the Lord. David Koresh contended that the figure in Isaiah 45 is further described in subsequent chapters, including Isaiah 52:13-53:12. He sees one figure in these chapters, not multiple end-time figures who save God's people. He admits that Jesus is also referred to in some of these passages, but says that Jesus did not fulfill all of them. For example, Isaiah 53:10 says that the suffering servant will "see his seed."³¹ But, Jesus did not have children, so Koresh inferred that part of the prophecy must refer to another end-time person—one who would be a messianic suffering servant named Cyrus (*Koresh*) who would sire children. Also, he pointed to Psalm 45:1-17, where a figure on a horse is predicted to come, one who Koresh inferred

would have many wives and children and who would use bow and arrows to fight the enemies of God's people. Koresh identified that figure with the rider in the first seal of Revelation, who also has bows and arrows. He concluded there would not be several different figures at the end-time vying to save God's people, but one final eschatological figure, the Lamb, who would encapsulate the mission of all these prophesied figures. His evidence for his identity as this final figure was his claim that only he had put all these prophecies together in such a way that they fit each of the seven seals. David Koresh had become the Lamb because by definition the Lamb would be known by being able to explain each of the seals by using the Old Testament prophets, as he believed Revelation 10:5-7 demanded.³²

Had Koresh finished writing his new revelation of the plan of salvation as revealed in the seven seals, it would have contained all of the above along with other esoteric revelations hinted at in the negotiation tapes. These topics include such revelations as the female nature of the Holy Spirit, the Merkabah revelations about God's "throne chariot," as well as intelligence about advanced civilizations near the constellation Orion, and how David's multiple wives are producing natural children who preexisted as "twenty four elders" in these heavenly realms. Koresh confidently said, "This is the most sacred information ever" and "it will be as good as or better than the Four Gospels."³³ He believed that reading this heavenly revelation would generate a mystical experience for the believer who would come to know Koresh "in his beauty" as the Lamb of God. Indeed, he intended it to be a world-changing intimate revelation of the Christ now present in the person of Koresh.

The tragedy of how the situation ended in a holocaust consuming Branch Davidian men, women, and children is that it was avoidable. Once Koresh received the long awaited "word," he was under obligation to God to write and then surrender. The Davidian dilemma was on the verge

of final resolution. However, from Koresh's perspective, despite God's warnings and promises in the four final messages, the world rejected "the most sacred information ever." In the Exodus Message, he noted that he had prayed that God would hold back the winds of His wrath to give the world more time to reconsider and receive the new written revelation of the seals. God had agreed. But, now on Monday, April 19, with the FBI assaulting Mt. Carmel, inserting gas and smashing down portions of the complex, Koresh concluded that the world was not worthy. Therefore, when the women and children were specifically singled out about Noon by government authorities who authorized the driver of one the modified tanks to deliver bursts of CS gas directly on them in the "storage room,"³⁴ Koresh called upon his Father to release the winds of His wrath and destroy the enemies of God's people.³⁵ From Koresh's perspective, God did just that by using the fire to consume the FBI and to translate the faithful Branch Davidians into spirit beings who became "God's army" of flaming spirits. In this act, the sixth seal broke open, and God's people were vindicated.³⁶

This horrific mistake by the FBI is another example of their inability to "translate" Koresh's biblical language into intelligence that would have informed them about the realities "on the ground." In an earlier video tape that Koresh released to the FBI he clearly informs them that depending on their actions events could take a turn for the worse resulting in injury to the community and especially the children. He refers them to Zechariah 13:7, *"Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who stands next to me," says the LORD of hosts. "Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones."* Anyone familiar with the book of Zechariah would have caught the chilling point. The implication is that wrong decisions by the authorities would precipitate the deaths of the Branch Davidian children by the hand of their enemy. But there were no worldview translators who spoke the language of

scripture on duty to catch the horrific implications of that passage David used to warn the FBI, despite the fact that the Branch Davidians mother tongue was scripture!

It is true that for over fifty years, the various permutations of the Davidian tradition had been discussing what the biblical texts promised in the way of fire in the end time. Newport calls special attention to the fact that the Davidian community believed that fire would play an important role in the final confrontation of the community with the enemies of God.³⁷ In sermons and publications they had speculated on what the book of Daniel means about the people of God perishing by sword, by pestilence and by fire.³⁸ Such eschatological prophecies in Daniel and Revelation had convinced them that one day the world would turn on them for following God, for keeping the Sabbath and Holy Days, for not observing “pagan Christmas” and “pagan Easter,” for not eating pork, for doing as they believed Jesus did based on the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. They realized that, indeed, they may someday get burned up by their enemies. Then again, they speculated that God might protect them as He did the three Hebrews in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3) and Daniel in the lions’ den (Daniel 6). Or, perhaps there would be a combination of both, as in 1 Thessalonians 4 and 1 Corinthians 15, where the people of God are transformed into spirit through a divine act. At any rate, the Branch Davidians understood that God would use fire to destroy the end-time enemies of God’s people, prior to elevating His people to spirit life.

Kenneth Newport echoes law enforcement suspicions that the fire at Mt. Carmel was inevitable. He implies that there was little federal authorities could have done to have avoided the holocaust that the Branch Davidians, he posits, were planning as a result of their decades-long belief that fire was in the prophetic cards. In other words, Koresh never intended to surrender, desiring instead to bring about fulfillment of the fire prophecies leading to the

destruction of himself and the community. Newport feels that faced with such inevitability, the FBI had a hopeless situation.³⁹

However, this view is wrong. Koresh does not say that the prophecies of a final fire are inevitable, nor does his prophetic hermeneutic equate prophecy with destiny. First, on April 14 Koresh puts in writing his promise to surrender and sets in motion a plan to bring that about through his lawyer and in the messages he releases. Curiously, Newport devotes scant attention to these pivotal documents produced by Koresh from April 10 to April 19. Secondly, Koresh says repeatedly on the negotiation tapes that God wants people to repent. He believes that is why prophecies exist: to make people change their behavior. If they do, then dire prophecies of destruction need not fall on them. Prophecies thus are *forewarnings*, not decrees etched in stone. For example, Jonah prophesied that Nineveh would be destroyed. But, contrary to that prediction, God spared Nineveh because people can repent. So despite the thread of discussion in Davidian history about fire and the destruction of the community, Koresh taught that people could avoid drastic scenarios that prophecies *forewarned* about. This is clear from his statement on March 6 to a negotiator, “Do you know who has opened the Psalm up to you forewarning you of the events that I am trying to keep you from fulfilling?”⁴⁰

Even more than this fact, what refutes Newport’s theory of inevitability is the content of the four final messages delivered by Koresh. They show that the history of the Davidian movement, from Koresh’s viewpoint, had reached a revolutionary moment. Unlike all previous phases in their tradition, God had now authorized the writing of a new revelation that would be “better than the Four Gospels.” It will be the “most sacred message ever.” This new revelation is so important that the prophecies of fire and of the death of the Lamb can be avoided. The world is being given, as it were, a new biblical revelation. Once he finishes it, Koresh intends for

scholars of religion around the world to have immediate access to it so that they will have the opportunity to fathom its divine secrets. He believes that this unique manuscript will initiate others into the intimate marriage supper of the Lamb when the King will be seen “in his beauty.” Koresh writes that what happens to him is not important in light of the privilege of writing this new revelation. He says, “You can do what you will with this beast.”⁴¹ The former catastrophic scenario featured in traditional Davidian prophetic lore need not culminate in a holocaust because now God was giving mankind an astounding new written revelation through David Koresh.

Further, the older traditional Davidian prophetic schema had not factored into it the perpendicular intervention initiated by the activities of non-Davidian scholars. Once Koresh discovered that non-Davidian religion scholars were ready and willing to listen to his interpretation of the seven seals, the traditional trajectory inherent in Davidian end-time prophecy was interrupted. From this unexpected turn of events, Koresh responded creatively and offered a new prophetic plan that would have resolved the crisis peacefully.⁴²

But on Monday, April 19, Koresh saw that the FBI rejected this world-transforming revelation, and there was nothing he could do to change their minds. The frantic voice of his right-hand man, Steve Schneider, can be heard on the FBI bug tapes, pleading that the phone line be reconnected so he could tell the FBI that there was no need to assault the community since there is no doubt that David has been writing the seals as he promised.⁴³ This was to no avail. Given this eschatological drama, as it was from Koresh’s viewpoint, the disastrous sixth seal was about to open.

Neither the FBI nor the Branch Davidians intended to incinerate the community. The authorities deny it, and the Branch Davidians rejected suicide. But given the religious worldview

and eschatological dynamics of the community, did the releasing of “the winds of God’s wrath” include unleashing an eschatological fire? Koresh believed that Jesus “performed” prophecies, such as the triumphant entry into Jerusalem where Jesus commanded his disciples to bring him a colt so that the prophecy in Zechariah 9:9 would be fulfilled where the Messiah is to ride on “a colt, the foal of an ass.”⁴⁴ Perhaps Koresh “performed” the prophecies referring to an end-time fire which would surround the people of God, protecting them from invaders. Zechariah 2:5, which predicted that God’s people would be protected by a “wall of fire,” had been commented on previously in Davidian discussions.⁴⁵ Had the FBI waited for Koresh to write the new revelation, such speculations about the fire’s origin would not be necessary. Instead, whatever its efficient cause, the authorities missed the key to resolving the crisis peacefully and precipitated the holocaust itself.

The writing of the message of salvation was the most important thing in the history of the world for Koresh. For him, it was the final consummation of not only Davidian history, but the entire history of Christianity-- the most precious gift that God could give mankind. Once the new message of salvation was written and delivered to mankind, the Davidian dilemma would be over and the crisis resolved. The wait would not have been long since David completed the first seal in about two nights. Revelation 10:2 refers to this end time revelation as a “little book.” But, the overly anxious authorities ignored the Judgment Message, the Hand Message, the Exodus Message, and rejected the Seal Message. Near Noon on April 19, they inserted CS gas directly on the women and children, “fulfilling” the disturbing prophecy that Koresh had warned them of in Zechariah 13:7 where enemies attack “the little ones.” At 12:01 FBI agent Byron Sage theologizes over the loudspeaker, “Vernon is no longer the Messiah.”

¹ Cf. J. Phillip Arnold, “The Davidian Dilemma—to Obey God or Not?” in *From the Ashes: Making Sense of Waco*, ed. James R. Lewis (Rowman & Littlefield, 1994).

² “Worldview translators” refers to sources who are able to explain the ideology involved in a crisis without reducing it to mere psychological needs; the entire constellation of beliefs are considered in the analysis. They decode the symbolic language of those involved in an effort to enhance understanding of what exactly is being said and, hence, facilitate resolution of the crisis. Thanks to Jayne S. Docherty, Ph.D. for the term; Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently, From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (Seven Bridges Press, LLC, 2000), 23, 187, 202, 213, n 112. Special recognition expressed to John Wheeler, rakkav.com, for providing research and editorial assistance for this paper.

³ Such characterizations of Koresh and church members were commonly applied by authorities during their press conferences held in Waco during the standoff, as well as in the negotiations with the community; <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu>.

⁴ The authorities spoke on the telephone for hours daily with Koresh and others throughout the 51-day standoff. These tapes and other tapes of Koresh’s sermons and interviews are available, in part, online at Texas State University and at the law offices of Joe Turner in Austin, TX. The author’s personal conversations with surviving Branch Davidians serve as source material also. See <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu> for an on-line collection of some of these sources.

⁵ Kenneth G. C. Newport, *The Branch Davidians of Waco: The History and Beliefs of an Apocalyptic Sect* (Oxford, 2006).

⁶ “Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” Matthew 24:42, RSV). Cf. Luke 21:36.

⁷ “So when you see the desolating sacrilege [KJV: the abomination of desolation] spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand)...” (Matthew 24:15, RSV).

⁸ James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (University of California, 1995), explain the complexities of Koresh’s worldview and how this was reduced to “Bible babble” by the FBI. This excellent work contains some source material used in this article. Koresh explains that he received audible revelations: “the Lord’s voice came to me;” See *The Identity of the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man*, Study Given by Vernon Wayne Howell {aka David Koresh}, June 14, 1986, transcribed by David E. Bunds in <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu>. The clash between such religious beliefs and secular society is examined in David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton, eds. *Cults, Religion, and Violence* (Cambridge, 2002).

⁹ “And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.’” (Matthew 26:39, RSV).

¹⁰ David Koresh, Letter of April 14, 1993 to Dick DeGuerin for the promise to surrender after writing the seals.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Revelation 10:5-7, RSV.

¹³ E.g., J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries*, 38, (Garden City, New York, Doubleday: 1975); Ford Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgment*, 2nd edition (Fortress Press, 1998); Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World*, ed. Gerhard Krodel (Fortress Press, 1998).

¹⁴ Tabor and Gallagher, op. cit.

¹⁵ Yahweh, Letter to Mankind, April 10, 1993. (*The Judgment Message*, channeled through David Koresh.)

¹⁶ Yahweh, Second Letter to Mankind, April 11, 1993 (*The Hand Message* channeled through David Koresh).

¹⁷ Koresh insisted on this point: the seals must be understood in the light of the OT prophets; most interpreters do not systematically correlate each of the seals with each book of the Bible, as Koresh attempted. Thus they failed, in his view, the acid test to identify the Lamb who would be able to so correlate. Negotiation Tapes, March 1-8, 1993; Tabor and Gallenger, 8ff.

¹⁸ David Koresh, Letter of April 14, 1993 (*The Exodus Message*).

¹⁹ “Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer [KJV: that they should rest yet for a little season], until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been” (Revelation 6:11, RSV).

²⁰ Both the Hebrew and the Aramaic of Daniel (Masoretic Text) specify “two times”.

²¹ “And I was told, ‘You must *again* prophesy about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings’” (Revelation 10:11, RSV).

²² David Koresh, The First Seal, April 18, 19, 1993 (*The Seal Message*). The intervention of outside scholars in the life of a religious group is controversial; cf. Leon Festinger, Henry W. Riecken and Stanley Schachter, *When Prophecy Fails* (University of Minnesota, 1956). For us, Albert Schweitzer’s ethic of reverence for life superseded calculations of this sort.

²³ KGBS Radio Broadcast of April 1, 1993, Ron Engelman Show with James Tabor and Phil Arnold; Negotiation Tapes, April 1993; Koresh, Letter of April 14 to Dick DeGuerin.

²⁴ Cf. Hal Lindsey and Carole C. Carson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Zondervan, 1970); and Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* (Tyndale House, reprint 2011), which in turn inspired a series of novels.

²⁵ Newport, 227 calls it “dynamic monarchian Christology”. One expression of it was this: “the Christ [True Prophet] from the beginning of the world is hastening through the ages” (*Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* 2.22). Cf. Negotiation Tapes, March, 1993; personal phone conversations with jailed Livingstone Fagan in March/April, 1993; and Tabor, *Patterns of the End: Qumran to Waco*, paper given at the Princeton University Symposium on Messianism, March, 1996.

²⁶ “Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7 RSV).

²⁷ “Your eyes will see the king in his beauty; they will behold a land that stretches afar” (Isaiah 33:17, RSV), commented on by Koresh in *The Seal Message*, Chapter 1.

²⁸ David Koresh, Poem in First Seal (*The Seal Message*).

²⁹ “Thus says the LORD [*Y-h-w-h* (יהוה)] to his anointed, to Cyrus [*Koresh* or in context, *Khoresh* (כורש)], whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed” (Isaiah 45:1, RSV).

³⁰ That is, “to his anointed [*l'mashiho* (למשיח)]”. “Messiah”, of course, comes from the Hebrew *mashiah*, “anointed”.

³¹ “Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, *he shall see his offspring* [KJV: *he shall see his seed*; but cf. Hebrew: *he shall see seed*], he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand” (Isaiah 53:10, RSV).

³² Interestingly, this writer has found no other messianic figures to have claimed an identity with the name Cyrus/Koresh other than David Koresh and Cyrus Teed, an early 19th/20th century religious figure who shared similar beliefs with David Koresh regarding the femininity of the Holy Spirit and the significance of the seven seals. Further, Cyrus Teed also saw himself as the final Koresh, the final David, and the white horse rider of the first seal. He, too, died from a violent encounter with authorities. His publication *The Flaming Sword* seeks to explain the seals in the light of eternal life through physical regeneration. Teed shares connections to the House of David religious group which arose from remnants of Mother Ann Lee and the Shakers. Perhaps proleptically, in their 1691 founding document there is a reference to Cyrus as a messianic figure, as well as statements about how the “spirit of David” shall revive in the church, as well as promised that Christ “will first appear and represent Himself in some chosen vessels.” This document was republished in 1932 by the House of David. See, Robert S. Fogarty, *The Righteous Remnant: The House of David* (Kent State, 1989), 138, 139; 147-151. Strangely, David Koresh and Steve Schneider, when asked about Cyrus Teed by the FBI during the standoff on the April negotiation tapes, claim to have no knowledge of him. Had the FBI pursued this further by giving them access to books by this original Koresh from Florida, it would have created some consternation on the part of some members as to how this could be possible. Despite Davidian interest in these books, the authorities failed to send them in, and they denied requests by Steve on March 15 to have me speak directly with David Koresh, Negotiation Tapes for March 15, 1993. We can speculate that although David and Steve knew nothing about Cyrus “Koresh” Teed, perhaps before she died Branch Davidian leader Lois Roden passed on Teed’s teachings about Koresh to David, later to bloom into a messianic fervor. In her wide travels Roden may have recognized Teed’s shared doctrine of the female Holy Spirit. On a hunch, I found a book about Cyrus Teed’s Koreshianity in the Waco Public Library, apparently secured in the 1980’s. Who in Waco would have had interest in such a book? On Teed’s Koreshianity, see Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914* (Lexington Books, 2003), 81, and the State Archives of Florida On-Line Catalog, http://dliis.dos.state.fl.us/index_researchers.cfm. Also, China’s Hong Xiuquan, mystical leader of the 19th century Taiping Heavenly Kingdom, hints at his identity as the white horse rider of the first seal and, possibly, the Lamb who makes war. Jonathan D. Spence, *God’s Chinese Son* (New York, 1996), 295-297.

³³ Messages of David Koresh from April 10-April 19, 1993. Cf. Tabor and Gallagher, op. cit.; and personal conversations with surviving Branch Davidians in Waco.

³⁴ In 1995 U.S. House of Representatives’ Committee on Government Reform and Oversight, CEV driver Clark testified that he located the women and children and purposely delivered the CS gas into their safety room by driving his vehicle farther into the church structure where he could more effectively inject the gas directly into their chamber. Peculiarly, he also testified to those of us in attendance about his status as a church-going Christian. Since this was about Noon and since the fires start immediately thereafter, it is likely that this final act of violence drove Koresh to conclude that Zech 13:7 was to be fulfilled through the FBI’s hand “on the little ones,” as he had warned in the released video.

³⁵ Cf. Revelation 7:1, where four angels hold back the four winds of the earth, and Revelation 9:13-15, where the four angels are released.

³⁶ Cf. Revelation 6:12-17.

³⁷ Newport, 308ff.

³⁸ “And those among the people who are wise shall make many understand, though they shall fall by sword and flame, by captivity and plunder, for some days” (Daniel 11:33, RSV).

³⁹ Newport, 274ff.

⁴⁰ Negotiation Tapes, March 2, 1993, p. 11, March 6, 1993, p. 24 of transcripts from <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu>; personal phone conversations with jailed Livingstone Fagan in March/April 1993.

⁴¹ David Koresh, April 14 Letter; <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu>.

⁴² This is the crucial importance of the final four “messages,” two directly from God, one an impassioned letter from Koresh and the revolutionary exposition of the First Seal believed to be of eternal value to humanity. Without perceiving the pivotal role of these final four messages, the peaceful resolution of the crisis will continue to be unrecognized by researchers. They are found in <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu>.

⁴³ FBI Bug Tapes for Monday, April 19, 1993. The phone line had been severed; agents monitoring the bug tapes may have heard the request for a phone line.

⁴⁴ “Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass” (Zechariah 9:9, RSV); cf. Matthew 21:1-11; John 12:12-16. Negotiation Tapes, March 7, 1993, p. 11 from transcript at <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu>; telephone conversations with Livingstone Fagan, March/April 1993.

⁴⁵ “For I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says the LORD, and I will be the glory within her” (Zechariah 2:5, RSV); Negotiation Tapes, March, April, 1993, <http://ashesofwaco.library.txstate.edu>; Newport, 308ff.