

From the Ashes

Making Sense of Waco

James R. Lewis, Editor

Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.

Published in the United States of America
by Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
4720 Boston Way, Lanham, Maryland 20706

3 Henrietta Street, London WC2E 8LU, England

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British Cataloging in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

From the ashes : making sense of Waco / James R. Lewis,
editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Waco Branch Davidian Disaster, Tex., 1993. 2. Branch Davidians. 3. Koresh, David, 1959-1993.

BP605.B72F76 1994 976.4'284063—dc20 93-48400 CIP

ISBN 0-8476-7914-4 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 0-8476-7915-2 (pbk. : alk. paper)

Printed in the United States of America



TM The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Chapter 5

The Davidian Dilemma—To Obey God or Man?

J. Phillip Arnold

For fifty-one days the Branch Davidians waited inside their religious center at Mt. Carmel, refusing to obey federal authorities who demanded their immediate surrender. Why did nearly one hundred members of this Judeo-Christian religious community volunteer to remain inside Mt. Carmel despite the fact that massive firepower was arrayed against them and their messiah David Koresh?¹

Americans apparently have no problem understanding why a few hundred men went to their deaths in 1836 in a standoff with government authorities at another Texas religious center south of Mt. Carmel at the Alamo mission in San Antonio. In fact, the Alamo defenders are remembered as American martyrs who sacrificed their lives for freedom from a foreign foe. But moderns do not understand or admire the Davidians for refusing to surrender to authorities. After all, the Davidians certainly made no claims to represent the nation-state, and the authorities surrounding Mt. Carmel were not stereotypical "evil foreigners."

Although the Davidians thought that they were defending individual liberty and freedom of religion, this was not the major reason *why* they refused to come out, go to trial, and continue their religious mission from prison if convicted. The question remains why nearly one hundred people

adamantly refused to exit their religious center at Mt. Carmel and acquiesce to the demands of the American government.

The Branch Davidians knew full well why it was impossible for them to comply with the authorities' demand to exit Mt. Carmel. Their resistance had nothing to do with their guilt or innocence. It had everything to do with their belief in God. (The Davidians believed that *God* had commanded them to remain inside the center until God permitted them to leave the building. Obedience to God was more important to them than submission to human authority—when the two were in conflict, God was to be obeyed.)

Federal authorities and the media failed to take seriously the crucial importance of Davidian religious faith. By not factoring in the determinative role that religious faith played for the Davidians, federal negotiations with the group were doomed from the start. Instead of expressing profound insight into the importance of Davidian faith, the authorities and the media constantly demeaned the Davidians by reducing them to "cultists," "con men," "zombies," and victims of "brain-washing." These pejorative and value-laden concepts prevented any crisis-resolving communication to develop between the negotiators and the Davidians.

The inability to understand and relate to the religious beliefs of the Davidians illustrates an abysmal lack of understanding of the phenomenon of religious faith. The absence of empathetic knowledge about this dimension of human experience severely crippled any chance for a peaceful resolution of this crisis and will continue to frustrate the efforts of authorities in future crises as we near the year 2000.

But it is not enough to grant the fact that the Davidians possessed deeply held religious beliefs which determined their decision-making. We also must enquire as to what was the specific *content* of their religion which necessitated—in their minds—their refusal to exit Mt. Carmel. What caused them to conclude that God wanted them inside and not outside Mt. Carmel?

The Davidian belief that it was against God's will for them to exit Mt. Carmel was based on prophetic scripture, especially the fifth seal of the Book of Revelation. It is crucial to grasp the fact that the Branch Davidians are a people of the text. For them the words of the Bible are the authoritative revelation of God directed primarily to God's remnant people living at the "end time." Although Koresh was believed to be an inspired prophet figure, even his revelations had to have a basis in the text of scripture. Using the ancient Jewish *peshet* method of interpretation, the Davidians saw the fulfillment of specific biblical prophecies in their particular group at Mt. Carmel—much like the Essenes found scriptural prophecies fulfilled in their community at Qumran.²

It is important to realize that for several years Koresh had preached that the "seven seals" of the Book of Revelation were in the process of being fulfilled. That is why the Davidians expectantly awaited the unveiling and

fulfillment of each seal in order. They came to believe that the first seal was fulfilled in 1985 when their prophet David Koresh became the white-horse rider of Revelation 6:2. About this time Koresh began to expound the seals, using the prophetic writings of the Bible and the Psalms of David as the primary hermeneutical key.³ After the fulfillment of the first seal the Davidian community awaited the opening of the second seal. Specific events in the life of the community soon convinced them that the second seal was coming to pass. Confirmed in their faith and inspired by these wondrous fulfillments, the Davidians eagerly awaited in faith the opening and closing of the remaining seals. Within a few years it seemed to them that seals three and four had been fulfilled by important events which took place between 1985 and 1992.⁴ The entire church now confidently awaited the catastrophic fifth seal which would precede the direct intervention of God in seals six and seven.

The fifth seal is catastrophic because it clearly predicts the violent deaths of the faithful people of God in the end time. The text in Revelation 6:9-11 states:

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 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.

It is crucial to note that the slaying of God's people predicted in the fifth seal occurs in *two phases*. In the first phase only some of the people are to be slain by their enemies. The remainder of God's people are to be slain after a special *waiting* period which lasts for a "little season." Only after these two killing sprees will God directly aid the people by divine intervention as described in seals six and seven. The Davidians believed that this passage commanded the survivors of the first killing episode to patiently await God's supernatural intervention which would occur after a "little season" of waiting. This means that after the fulfillment of the first four seals the Davidians were expecting the opening of the fifth seal which, in their view, predicted that they would be slain by enemies in *two* separate attacks. But they did not know exactly when these tragic events would transpire. Soon, but how soon?

Time was shorter than they thought. When the Davidian community saw the ATF approach them in force on February 28, 1993, the Davidians believed that the moment had come for the dreaded fifth seal to open. That

is why Koresh could say that he had known that the government was coming long before the ATF had known. From the Davidian viewpoint, the ATF began shooting at the people of God—killing a number of them. The actual killing of a number of their members confirmed for the Davidians that Revelation 6:9 was fulfilled on Sunday morning February 28. They concluded that phase one of the fifth seal, which predicted the first killing spree, had been fulfilled.

What were they to do? They were driven to the text for direction. Revelation 6:11 informed them that God would intervene in apocalyptic fury to avenge the slaying of the remnant people very soon. God's instructions urged patience and spoke of a short waiting period—a "little season." After this brief period the remainder of the people of God would be killed.⁵ The Davidians believed that this interpretation was confirmed by Isaiah 26:20 which commanded the people of God to "enter thou into thy chambers, and shut thy doors about thee: hide thyself as it were for a little moment [a "little season"], until the indignation be overpast." In obedience to their understanding of the text the Davidians did exactly that—for fifty-one days they waited because God told them to in Revelation 6:11! For them it was a matter of conscience—of faithful obedience to God's word. From the Davidian point of view the truth of God was non-negotiable.

Confronted by such religious faith, the authorities found it difficult to negotiate with the Davidians. But had negotiators fully understood the importance of the biblical text to the Davidians, they may have convinced them to leave Mt. Carmel. The Davidians would have exited the center had they been convinced from scripture that God wanted them to leave. In April, the authorities came close to doing just that.

On Sunday, April 4th, they permitted the Davidians to have an audio tape made by Dr. James Tabor and me which spoke to Koresh in biblical language he could understand. We argued from scripture that the "waiting period" was much longer than the "little season" of less than three months which he had expected. The second phase of the fifth seal could be years away. We offered biblical reasons for the possibility that the "waiting period" included time for him to have a trial and to continue his ministry worldwide. Granting his presuppositions for the moment, we pointed him to Revelation 10:11, which "predicted" that "he" had *another* prophetic mission yet to be fulfilled. He must "prophesy *again*" to many nations. After hearing our suggestions during Passover week, Koresh decided to lead his people out from Mt. Carmel and let the system do what it would to him. For the first time he confirmed in writing that he had finally received the long-awaited authorization from God to leave the center.⁶ But first he must write his interpretation of the seven seals for the world to read—perhaps the "little book" of Revelation 10:8-10. If the world would wait for this written

revelation, it would prove itself worthy and could be spared the catastrophes prophesied in the seals.

But on the morning of April 19, with the tanks knocking on his door and dangerous CS gas spreading throughout Mt. Carmel, Koresh became convinced that his original time-table for the fifth seal was correct and that Tabor and Arnold were wrong. It was evident to him that the world was rejecting the seals and that phase two of the fifth seal was now crashing down. Unable to disobey God and "submit" to mere human authority, Koresh and his fellow-believers read scripture, prayed, and accepted their "prophesied" fate. The "little season" was past—the waiting period was over.

Government authorities mistakenly believed that the Davidians would come out of the center once it was infiltrated with painful CS gas. If the children were traumatized, it was hoped that parents would usher them outside to safety. Again, the authorities failed to reckon with the nature of religious faith. They failed to perceive the qualitative difference between a group of religious zealots and a group of bandits or counterfeiters. The Davidians really believed that God's authoritative command in Revelation 6:11 and Isaiah 26:20 took precedence over the sufferings of their loved ones.

Had the government authorities seriously researched Davidian faith and practice they would have realized that successful negotiations with them would have never forced them to choose between obedience to divine authority and human authority. By demanding that the members disobey their understanding of God's commands and "submit to lawful authority," the negotiators created a no-win situation for the Davidians. Once they were confronted with such an alternative, it was a foregone conclusion to those with an awareness of the power of religious faith that the Davidians would remain obedient to their understanding of God's command. In effect, the church members were told to choose between obedience to finite human authority and what they perceived to be infinite divine authority. They believed they should place their lives and their children's safety in the hands of the living God rather than in the hands of government forces. Their decision to remain within the center despite the infusion of CS gas set the stage for the final conflagration where the remainder of the people were slain in what the Davidians would call the final phase of the fifth seal.

The origins of the fire which followed upon the infusion of CS gas remains a mystery. It may have started accidentally due to tanks knocking over kerosene lanterns—as reported by survivors. Or, it may have been deliberately set by certain leaders inside the center. Either way, most church members went to their deaths believing that their enemies were destroying them on schedule as prophesied in Revelation 6:11. From the Davidian viewpoint, what role did the fire on April 19 play in their understanding of scripture and prophecy?

It is certain that the Davidians were familiar with the numerous biblical references to the role that fire would play in God's final judgment—"fervent heat," "flaming fire," "ashes" are well-known images in apocalyptic passages. Many of these passages confirm that fire would be the means by which God would melt away the old world order and usher in the new. In Malachi 4:1-3 we read that "the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up. . . . for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet." In verse 5 this "great and dreadful day" of the Lord's fiery wrath is associated with the coming of an "Elijah" who arrives shortly prior to the last day. The Davidians believed that their church was a typological fulfillment of this Elijah prophecy. As the end-time work of Elijah they would fulfill the role of Elijah immediately prior to the coming of the Lord in "flaming fire taking vengeance" (2 Thess. 1:8).

A further association of the work of Elijah with "fire from heaven" is evinced in 1 Kings 18 where Elijah calls down fire which in verse 38 "consumed the burnt sacrifice, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water." Verse 19 locates this remarkable event as taking place at Mt. Carmel! It may be that the fire of April 19 was called down from heaven as a typological fulfillment of Elijah's conflagration at the earlier Mt. Carmel.

Given the important role that eschatological fire plays in scripture and in Davidian exegesis, it is likely that David Koresh and the church members considered the burning of their sacred center as the prophesied fire which would immediately precede the opening of the sixth seal. For them, the burning of Mt. Carmel could be the spark which would ignite the worldwide conflagration ushering in the "day of the Lord" when the earth "shall be burned up" (2 Pet. 3:10). The Davidians also were familiar with Daniel 11:33 which predicts that the people of God in the last days would be consumed by fire. The passage states: "and those among the people who are wise [the Davidians] shall make many understand, though they shall fall by sword and *flame*." The Davidians also knew the Second Apocalypse of Baruch which states in 10:19:

make haste and take all things, and cast them into the fire. . . and the flame sends them to him who created them, so that the enemies do not take possession of them.

Some find it difficult to believe that David Koresh could have planned the fire since scripture indicates that the end-time holocaust is to be started by heavenly beings, not humans. But we know that Koresh saw himself in more than human terms. He portrayed himself as the Persian King Cyrus and as King David.⁷ He regarded himself as the Lamb of the Book of

Revelation who must be slain (Rev. 5:6,9) before assuming his avenging role as a conquering king. And remarkably he signed two of his last letters as "Yahweh Koresh." Also on a radio interview after the original ATF raid Koresh identified himself as the one who spoke to the woman at the well two thousand years ago in John 4. He also seems to have identified himself with the angel in the Book of Revelation who had in his hand the book with seven seals. Apparently, this same angel fills a vessel with fire and throws it on the earth in Revelation 8:3-5. The text states:

And *the angel* took the censer, and *filled it with fire* of the altar, and cast it into the earth: and there were voices, and thunderings, and lightnings, and an earthquake.

We do not know whether David Koresh considered this passage to be a prophecy that his last act on earth would be to start the eschatological fire beginning with Mt. Carmel. But his last words may have resonated those of an earlier David three thousand years ago, recorded in 2 Samuel 23:1-7. And these words conclude with a reference to "fire":

Now these be the *last words of David*. . . . The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue. . . . and they shall be utterly *burned with fire* in the same place.⁸

Perhaps, in those final moments as the fifth seal drew to a close, Koresh saw himself as a Davidic messiah who brings in the final conflagration. Unable to surrender to the enemies of God's people, did Koresh repeat King David's last words and proceed "in flaming fire" to take "vengeance on them that know not God" (2 Thess. 1:7,8)?

It is impossible to know with certainty how the blaze started. But, whoever started the fire, Koresh and his followers considered their own deaths to be a type of martyrdom. The Davidians were familiar with the tradition of self-inflicted martyrdom in Jewish history. The biblical account of the deaths of Saul and his sons would have been known to them as well as the Masada story.⁹ At Masada in 72 C.E. Jewish resistance fighters committed mass martyrdom rather than surrender to Roman authorities. After setting fire to their compound, the Masada defenders drew lots and took one another's lives rather than submit to pagan captivity and death. In the last moments their leader, Eleazar, said:

It is very plain that we shall be taken within a day's time; but it is still an eligible thing to die after a glorious manner, together with our dearest friends. . . . But first let us destroy. . . the fortress *by fire*.¹⁰

Josephus writes that the fortress wall "was chiefly made of wood, it soon took fire; and when it was once set on fire, its hollowness made that fire spread to a mighty flame!"¹¹

Like the Masada defenders the Davidians believed that God did not want them to surrender to their enemies. For this reason David Koresh and his followers refused for fifty-one days to leave their religious center at Mt. Carmel until they had fulfilled God's plan. They perished in a fiery furnace rather than disobey what they believed was God's command to first explain the seven seals in writing before surrendering to the authorities.

Notes

¹Branch Davidian theology is characterized by

- A. an apocalyptic-prophetic tradition
- B. a Torah-observant practice, including the Sabbath and festivals of Leviticus 23
- C. a mystical orientation, perhaps related to Luric Kabbalah

²*Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (New York, 1993).

³Koresh concluded that the "key of David" in Revelation 3:7 was a reference to the Psalms written by David. Ingeniously, Psalms 45 was used by Koresh to interpret Rev. 6:1. He argued that since the author of Revelation used symbols drawn from the Hebrew prophets, a correct interpretation of the book must integrate the prophetic writings—especially in view of Revelation 10:7. Since the Davidians preferred the KJV all citations herein are from it.

⁴These prophetic fulfillments included the conceiving of a number of children who were believed to be divinely ordained to rule over the messianic kingdom as the "House of David" in Israel (Ps. 45:16;8:2). Although Koresh intended to explain these fulfillments to the public in writing prior to surrendering to authorities, no detailed account has been given by surviving members.

⁵They understood a "little season" to be less than three months. Since Passover was less than a "season" from February 28, the Davidians believed that their redemption might draw nigh during that holy season. They also relied on the Second Apocalypse of Baruch 28:2 which predicted that physical calamity would fall upon the people of God (read Davidians) after seven weeks or forty-nine days. Thus, it is probable that the Davidians expected trouble from the federals about day fifty-one.

⁶This was the long-awaited "word" from God which the authorities and media continually said they were waiting for him to receive. There is evidence that Koresh may have wanted to observe another Passover one month after the first one in obedience to Numbers 9:10,11 and 2 Chronicles 30. Not understanding the antiquity of this Jewish tradition, the authorities would have seen in this second observance only stalling tactics by a "con man." But the practice is well known and respected in Torah-observant faiths. Read 2 Chronicles 31:1: where

the enemies of God are defeated only *after* a faithful observance of a *second* Passover by a purified people of God.

⁷Surprisingly, there was another Koresh. Cyrus R. Teed changed his name to Koresh after a divine vision in 1869. He, too, founded a community—the "Koreshans" in Chicago and Florida. This first Koresh also proclaimed himself messiah and wrote on the seven seals of Revelation. He died in 1906 after a violent altercation with a marshal in Ft. Myers, Florida. *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, ed. J. Gordon Melton (Wilmington, NC, 1987), II, 37.

⁸Do not underestimate Koresh's photographic recall of scripture. He informed the ATF that he knew the Psalms backward and forward because *he* wrote them! Israelis said he knew the "*Tanach* cold." Immediately after the ATF raid, Koresh said on Dallas KRLD radio that Psalms 89 would now begin its tragic fulfillment: verses 38ff predict the rejection and death of a David. And in verse 46 *fire* plays a role in the resolution of the crisis.

⁹1 Samuel 31:3-6: "And the battle went sore against Saul, and the archers hit him; and he was sore wounded of the archers. Then said Saul unto his armourbearer, Draw thy sword, and thrust me through therewith; lest these uncircumcised come and thrust me through, and abuse me. But his armourbearer would not; for he was sore afraid. Therefore Saul took a sword, and fell upon it. And when his armourbearer saw that Saul was dead, he fell likewise upon his sword, and died with him. So Saul died, and his three sons, and his armourbearer, and all his men, that same day together." Arthur Droge and James Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom Among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (San Francisco, 1992).

¹⁰See Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Bk. VII, Chapt. 8, 5-7.

¹¹Ibid.

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