

Negotiating Salvation

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During the siege of the Mount Carmel Center, which lasted from February 28 through April 19, 1993, members of the Branch Davidian community and government representatives, primarily from the FBI, conducted extensive negotiations. The tapes and transcripts of those negotiations offer vivid evidence of the convictions of the besieged community, the dynamics of the negotiation process, and the barriers to a successful resolution of the conflict. They show that the ultimate failure of the negotiations cannot be traced on either side simply to a lack of comprehension of the other's position but rather to consciously conceived and consistently implemented strategies of self-presentation and persuasion by both parties. The stark differences between what the Branch Davidians and the FBI hoped to achieve through the negotiations underscore the difficulty of resolving conflicts between the government and millennial religious groups in a peaceful manner.

From the start, the standoff at Mount Carmel had a pronounced religious character. On the emergency 911 call that the Branch Davidians made to the Waco Sheriff's office on the first day of the standoff, David Koresh made it clear that for those at Mount Carmel everything was a matter of religious conviction. In response to Lt. Larry Lynch's plea that discussion of theology be deferred to another time, Koresh replied that "theology is life and death."¹

Koresh led a community of avid Bible students who had come together to learn about God's imminent judgment. As Steve Schneider, Koresh's trusted student and a major participant in the negotiations, commented on March 1, "the spiritual aspect . . . [is] really why I'm out here."² Koresh himself told a negotiator on March 5, "we, the people of God . . . seek heavenly places. We seek approbation from God. We want out of here. We want to be saved. We want a real life."³ Koresh underlined the urgency of that quest in a conversation on the following day: "What if God was trying to offer you a way out of a . . . present oncoming disaster of this nation, what if God has a witness to this nation because God is ready to deliverate [*sic*] his people . . . from the bands and the rulerships of all nations, and what if God is really going to set up his kingdom like they did in ancient times. . . . and what if God is

ready to judge the nations . . . as foretold by these prophets?”⁴ Koresh made it clear that any encounter with the saving apocalyptic knowledge he taught would necessitate a decision. On the second day of the siege, he recalled his admonition to an undercover agent who had spent time inside Mount Carmel: “Robert, you know I’ve showed you the truth out of the book, I am not going to hide anything from you. . . . but now you got to make a decision . . .”⁵ What was at stake in the negotiations for Koresh and his followers was the same thing that had been at stake throughout their time as students of the Bible—their own salvation and the salvation of a largely heedless humanity.⁶ Steve Schneider forcefully expressed the Branch Davidians’ position by telling a negotiator that “this is what it’s always been about, this . . . challenge of the spiritual, of the Bible.”⁷

The negotiators had a very different stake in the ongoing exchanges. Despite an occasional nod to securing a broader audience for Koresh’s teaching,⁸ they focused on getting the Branch Davidians to leave Mount Carmel through a standard negotiating process.⁹ On March 7, referring to Koresh’s teaching about the book sealed with seven seals in Revelation 5, one negotiator observed, “we are making an effort to determine what those are and to listen to you and to deal with what those things that you’re telling us about. In turn, I expect you to get those children together and send them out as we have agreed.”¹⁰ The negotiators viewed Koresh’s Bible studies as an opportunity to gain more insight into his character, not as an opportunity to pursue salvation. One of them later testified to Congress that what “we learned from listening to David Koresh for many hours [was] to try to understand the individual we were dealing with.”¹¹ Concerning the Branch Davidians’ goal of bringing the negotiators to an understanding of the Seven Seals, the same FBI agent emphasized that the negotiators had adopted the standard position that they should “neither embrace someone’s belief system nor . . . discount it.”¹²

While the Branch Davidians’ concern for salvation was cosmic, transcendental, and ultimate, the negotiators’ concern for the safe exit of the Davidians was terrestrial, practical, and proximate. For the FBI the negotiations had an overriding utilitarian goal, but for the Branch Davidians they provided an opportunity to exercise a divinely sanctioned mission. Steve Schneider captured those differences and their consequences in his remarks on March 15:

You know, the biggest difficulty, no question, has been you guys are not—I mean, you know, . . . this is a . . . group that’s tuned in to spiritual things or what they see as prophecies, events taking place in the final days, which they believe are here. And I know you men don’t have the same background and so forth. I mean, I know you’re trying to sympathize and give room for that, but I know from your perspective it would be difficult and hard. But, you know, I

mean, the reason they came here, *all that they are and what they want to be revolves around what they see him showing from that book.*¹³

Koresh himself echoed that sentiment on the same day, acknowledging that “I know you don’t want to talk religion, *but that’s all I am is religion.*”¹⁴ For Koresh and his followers, negotiations with the FBI for telephone lines, access to the press, milk for the children, legal assurances, and the departure of any members of the group were clearly subsidiary to the single most important topic, the doctrine of the Seven Seals. On March 7, Koresh asserted that “seven seals is the negotiation here. If you reject the seven seals, you’re rejecting me. If you reject me, you’re rejecting my father. And then judgment cannot be diverted. You will be punished. And your great nation, the United States of America . . .”¹⁵ On April 13, he presciently observed that “there’s just these Seven Seals and it’s a message of life and death.”¹⁶

Despite having radically different commitments, the government negotiators made several attempts to bridge the gap. One of the most creative was an attempt to redefine the nature of salvation itself. On March 8, a negotiator offered a hypothetical scenario to one of the Davidians:

N: Look, if I had [your brother] Joe standing down there at the end of the driveway right now, with his arms open and pleading to you, would you walk to him?

BD: (No verbal response.)

...

BD: I don’t know.

N: Why? Why not? Couldn’t that be God’s way of delivering you?

BD: (No verbal response.)

N: Couldn’t that be the deliverance you want? I know that he wants to be with you.

That attempt to redefine salvation or deliverance as immediate, terrestrial, and practical foundered on the Branch Davidians’ unwavering commitment to a transcendent God seated on a heavenly throne, with whom a brother at the end of a driveway simply could not compete.

Neither the negotiators nor the Branch Davidians could get the other to frame the negotiations in what they saw as acceptable terms. Although there were at least a few committed Christians on the negotiating team, none of them could accept Koresh’s specific understanding of the Christian scriptures, let alone his conception of his own role in the final days. Consistently, the negotiators refused to frame or conduct the negotiations in terms of the Davidians’ religious convictions. They asked why understanding the Seven Seals was so important, asserted that all of the Bible studies they heard did not explain why people would not come out of Mount Carmel, denied the relevance of spiritual matters

to the negotiations, and declared as late as April 16 that negotiations would get nowhere if they were devoted to discussing the Bible.¹⁷ When they did settle in to receive lengthy Bible studies from Koresh or one of the other members of the community, they often limited their participation to brief interjected expressions of assent designed only to keep the conversation going.¹⁸ The following exchange captures the general frustration with the Branch Davidians' position:

N: . . . Please tell me what you're going to do.

DK: I am trying. Please look at verse 2 of Nahum.

N: Let's not talk in those terms, please.

DK: No. Then you don't understand my doctrine. You don't want to hear the word of my God.

N: I have listened to you and listened to you, and I believe in what you say, as do a lot of other people, but the . . . bottom line is everybody now considers you David who is going to either run away from the giant or is going to come out and try to slay the giant. For God's sake, you know, give me an answer, David. I need to have an answer. Are you going to come out?¹⁹

As Koresh continued to make his scriptural argument, the exasperated negotiator finally implored, "Don't talk to me about the scriptures."²⁰ Despite the patience and concern evinced by several of the negotiators in grasping the typical patterns of Koresh's teaching about the Seven Seals, that statement accurately sums up the FBI's negotiating position.

For their part, the Branch Davidians, and especially Koresh, felt compelled to teach the truth that they had found in scripture. Koresh asserted that "the doctrine that I teach, I teach it no matter how incriminating it is against me" and that "whatever the seals contain is what I am responsible for doing this time."²¹ Koresh and his students, however, did little to adapt the typical form and content of their Bible studies for the radically different context of the negotiations. They employed the same focus on the message of the New Testament's book of Revelation as elaborated by the Psalms and prophets of the Christian Old Testament. As they did with whomever they tried to engage in study of the Bible, they attempted to enlist the negotiators in a detailed unfolding of the doctrine of the Seven Seals.²² The truth that they embraced could not be modified to fit the context of the negotiations. Koresh frequently quoted long passages of scripture, and at one point Steve Schneider even read the entirety of Revelation 18 to a negotiator.²³ That an impasse developed is wholly understandable.

In the course of the negotiations, the Branch Davidians again encountered the world's familiar unwillingness to learn about the Seven Seals.²⁴ The negotiators' failure to engage the truth that Koresh had uncovered in the Bible and their general unwillingness to engage in a frank exchange of religious views were seen as "stumbling blocks" by

the Davidians throughout the fifty-one days.²⁵ What the FBI wanted was to stifle the talk about the Bible and engage the Branch Davidians in a practical, rational, and goal-oriented process of negotiation.²⁶ Although they never presented it or conceived it as a prerequisite for their coming out, what the Branch Davidians most wanted was the conversion of the negotiators, effected through the same process of Bible study that they themselves had followed with Koresh. On March 2, Koresh summarized the process he envisaged: "So today we, we have a truth, a Bible truth. But it's not going to overthrow just the papacy. . . . It's going to, you know, bring all the world into a valley of decision. People are going to have to hear it. They're going to have to say to themselves well, you know, that's right. That is right. That is exactly what is being said in harmony. And that, that does agree."²⁷

For the members of the Mount Carmel community, such an outcome was definitely possible; their own lives were testimony to the impact of Koresh's Bible studies and could therefore easily serve as models for the negotiators to imitate. Time and again, they had seen Koresh bring a simple but powerful interpretive strategy to the Bible. He believed "that every book of the Bible meets and ends in the book of Revelation," particularly in its account of a heavenly book sealed with seven seals.²⁸ Koresh's interpretive task was therefore to uncover the web of relationships among individual biblical texts. He claimed that when "doctrine is properly weighed and measured, being systematically harmonized with scripture, text, chapter, book, then we develop an infallible, conclusive picture of what God's will is. Not just a little verse here, not just a little verse there. No. The content must be complete."²⁹ What could easily seem to outsiders to be random references to the biblical texts and the positing of arbitrary relationships between them appeared to the converted as the unveiling of hitherto unknown connections that cumulatively revealed an extraordinary message about the imminence of God's judgment in these last days. As Steve Schneider recalled, "I'm here because [of] the man who has had the ability to harmonize many—in fact all the Bible and made it very clear."³⁰ A self-styled seeker of truth,³¹ Schneider left Hawaii for the ramshackle Mount Carmel Center because "there's something [Koresh has] got to say that I don't have the ability to do. The . . . reason I'm here is because of what the man's been able to show with the Bible, the statements he's been able to produce."³² Schneider echoed the sentiment of Koresh's other students when he claimed that "the man already showed me more than I ever dreamed could be possible for a human being to learn."³³ With such sentiments constantly being reinforced by daily life within a small, insular community, it is not surprising that the Branch Davidians brought their faith in the transforming power of the Bible studies to the negotiations.

On their side, the negotiators perceived the persistence of talk about the Bible, the unwillingness to be practical, and, most importantly, Koresh's failure to exit as promised after his radio address was broadcast on March 2 as overwhelming impediments to progress. Nonetheless, each side could identify limited successes during the negotiations. Twenty-one children and fourteen adults did leave the Mount Carmel Center, and the Branch Davidians thought that at least a few negotiators had made sincere efforts to grasp the meaning of the Seven Seals. Nonetheless, positions quickly hardened. The Davidians saw no perceptible change until around April 14 when Koresh received God's permission to document his teaching. But because of what they saw as Koresh's failure to keep his promise to exit on March 2 and because of their ongoing distrust of Bible discussions, negotiators remained somewhat suspicious of whether Koresh would finish his manuscript and come out. The April 19 assault on the Mount Carmel Center conclusively ended the possibility of a negotiated settlement to the impasse.

The negotiation transcripts show that the Branch Davidians and the FBI agents thought about themselves, each other, and their respective missions in very different ways. By its nature as something ultimate, final, and transcendent, salvation cannot be subjected to negotiation; it can only be proclaimed. Its terms are set not by humans but by God. Truth, once identified, is absolute and makes its own demands.³⁴ The Mount Carmel negotiations indicate that negotiators, however they try, are highly unlikely to change any group's definition of what constitutes salvation. Nor are they likely to deter the group from the proclamation of its saving message. They may, however, be able to engage in constructive conversation about the ways in which salvation is pursued. Throughout the negotiations Branch Davidians asked the negotiators to subject Koresh's teaching about the Seven Seals to the scrutiny of scholars and theologians. On March 15, for example, Steve Schneider specifically requested that the FBI allow Phillip Arnold, a New Testament scholar, to discuss the Bible with Koresh.³⁵ The Branch Davidians repeatedly claimed that what they wanted was simply a fair hearing. Often, in their own conversion stories, they mentioned that they could not refute the truth that Koresh had shown them and thus felt compelled to commit to further study with him.³⁶ Koresh's April 14 letter made a similar proposition. He concluded that letter with this offer:

I will demand the first manuscript of the Seals be given to you [Dick DeGuerin, his attorney]. Many scholars and religious leaders will wish to have copies for examination. I will keep a copy with me. As soon as I can see that people like Jim Tabor and Phil Arnold have a copy I will come out and then you can do your thing with this beast.³⁷

Those comments suggest that the negotiators could have offered something to the Branch Davidians that they highly valued, a forum for the discussion of their distinctive theology and its urgent message of impending judgment. Such an offer would have simultaneously enabled the negotiators to remain true to their desire neither to embrace nor discount the beliefs of the Branch Davidians and afforded Koresh and his followers the opportunity to proclaim their message in a context other than the hostage-barricade situation that had been imposed on them. From the Branch Davidians' perspective it would have altered the context in which they exercised their mission while leaving unchanged the nature of the salvation they offered.³⁸ It could also have provided an opportunity for outsiders to influence the beliefs and behavior of the Branch Davidians by reasoning from the only source to which they granted transcendent authority, the Bible.

In fact, the negotiators repeatedly did offer the Branch Davidians a broader forum. But their offers were always linked to the prior demand that the Branch Davidians first exit the Mount Carmel Center, which itself depended upon the FBI agents' conviction that they were dealing with a complex hostage-barricade situation. The Branch Davidians found the linkage unacceptable and no significant movement on that issue occurred.

Finally, although the Mount Carmel negotiation transcripts reveal moments where the two parties seemed to achieve a fragile understanding of each others' goals and values, they reveal more often their intransigent commitments to competing definitions of the situation, understandings of authority, conceptions of justice, and visions of the future. Law enforcement officials, scholars, and believers alike need to reckon with the likelihood that understanding another's commitments and the view of the world in which they are embedded will not necessarily lead to a desired transformation of behavior. As important as it is in negotiation to understand both what and how the other party thinks, that will have no necessary consequences for what the other party actually does. Other factors in the context of negotiations can exert a powerful influence. The primary failures of the Mount Carmel negotiations can not be traced to a lack of understanding. Rather, from the initial raid, through the escalating restrictions placed on the community, to the final assault on Mount Carmel, the carefully considered and well-planned tactical actions of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and FBI agents consistently reduced the possibilities for successful negotiation. Even the most heroic acts of empathy and translation could not overcome the effects of the physical and psychological violence done to the Branch Davidians and their property. Although the negotiations were complicated by the intransigence of both parties, they were ultimately sabotaged by the

strategy of escalating pressure on those inside the Mount Carmel Center, which culminated in the April 19 assault.

ENDNOTES

¹ Transcript of 911 call, 28 February 1993. See “Waco 911,” *Nightline*, 9 June 1993 (transcript, Journal Graphics), 3-4.

² This and subsequent references to taped conversations between FBI negotiators and the Branch Davidians are available in transcript form at the FBI reading room at the bureau’s Hoover Building headquarters in Washington, D.C. FBI transcript of Tapes 4 and 5, 1 March 1993, 111. I retain grammatical, spelling, and other peculiarities from the transcripts.

³ FBI transcript of Tape 57, 5 March 1993, 23.

⁴ FBI transcript of Tape 68, 6 March 1993, 13.

⁵ FBI transcript of Tapes 4 and 5, 1 March 1993, 129.

⁶ I give more emphasis to the Branch Davidians’ spiritual interests than Jayne Docherty does in her observation that “for the FBI negotiators the purpose of the negotiations was to get everyone safely out of Mount Carmel, **while enforcing the law**. For the Branch Davidians the objective was to get everyone safely out of Mount Carmel, **if they could negotiate an equitable resolution of the conflict started on February 28 and if God approved**” (Jayne Seminare Docherty, “When the Parties Bring their Gods to the Table,” [Ph.D. diss., George Mason University, 1998], 189). My reading of the negotiation transcripts indicates that, even while they were besieged, the Davidians put the doctrine of the Seven Seals first.

⁷ FBI transcript of Tape 130, 16 March 1993, 20; see also 25.

⁸ See FBI transcript of Tape 57, 5 March 1993, 18.

⁹ See Docherty, “When the Parties Bring their Gods to the Table,” for a detailed and lucid treatment of the negotiations from the viewpoint of conflict resolution.

¹⁰ FBI transcript of Tape 80, 7 March 1993, 18-19. See FBI transcript of Tape 68, 6 March 1993, 10-13.

¹¹ United States Congress, *Activities of Federal Law Enforcement Agencies Toward the Branch Davidians* (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1996), part 2, 325-26.

¹² *Ibid.*, 325.

¹³ FBI transcript of Tape 129, 15 March 1993, 43. My emphasis.

¹⁴ FBI transcript of Tape 128, 15 March 1993, 25. My emphasis. See FBI transcript of Tape 201, 48, 51.

¹⁵ FBI transcript of Tape 80, 7 March 1999, 37.

¹⁶ FBI transcript of Tape 218, 13 April 1993, 9.

¹⁷ See FBI transcript of Tape 89, 7 March 1993, 40; FBI transcript of Tape 94, 8 March 1993, 19, 30-31, 34; FBI transcript of Tape 233, 16 April 1993, 44.

¹⁸ See FBI transcript of Tape 10A, 1 March 1993, 19-30.

¹⁹ FBI transcript of Tape 21, 2 March 1993, 28-29. See FBI transcript of Tape 96, 9 March 1993, 8-14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

²¹ FBI transcript of Tapes 4 and 5, 1 March 1993, 128; FBI transcript of Tape 21, 2 March 1993, 15.

²² On the consistency of Koresh's teaching about the Seven Seals from his 1985 revelatory experience in Israel through the siege, see Eugene V. Gallagher, "Theology is Life and Death": David Koresh on Violence, Millennialism, and Persecution," in *Millennialism, Violence, and Persecution*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, forthcoming).

²³ See FBI transcript of Tape 19, 2 March 1993, 8-11.

²⁴ See FBI transcript of Tape 90, 8 March 1993, 49; FBI transcript of Tape 233, 16 April 1993, 10.

²⁵ See FBI transcript of Tape 233, 15 April 1993, 12.

²⁶ See Docherty, "When the Parties Bring their Gods to the Table," 271.

²⁷ FBI transcript of Tape 13, 2 March 1993, 13.

²⁸ See Koresh's unfinished manuscript on the Seven Seals in James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 187-211, quotation from 197.

²⁹ FBI transcript of Tape 26, 3 March 1993, 13.

³⁰ FBI transcript of Tapes 4 and 5, 1 March 1993, 4-5.

³¹ FBI transcript of Tape 96, 9 March 1993, 8.

³² FBI transcript of Tapes 4 and 5, 1 March 1993, 73.

³³ Ibid., 113.

³⁴ See FBI transcript of Tape 13, 2 March 1993, 9, 34; Tapes 4 and 5, 1 March 1993, 129; Tape 27, 3 March 1993, 26; Tape 28, 3 March 1993, 14-15.

³⁵ See FBI transcript of Tape 129, 15 March 1993, 24.

³⁶ See Steve Schneider's comments in notes 29-30.

³⁷ As printed in Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 15-16.

³⁸ That was also the strategy adopted by Phillip Arnold and James Tabor, especially in their April 1 radio conversation with Ron Engelman on KGBS. See Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 13-17.