

The Persistence of the Millennium: Branch Davidian Expectations of the End after “Waco”

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The fire that destroyed the Mount Carmel Center near Waco, Texas, on 19 April 1993 took the lives of David Koresh and most of his Branch Davidian community. It did not, however, put an end to Branch Davidian speculation about God’s imminent judgment. Since 1993, surviving members of the Mount Carmel community, as well as some recent converts, have produced their own interpretations of the Bible and other theological tracts. In some of those texts the anticipation of the impending apocalypse is as urgent as it was in Koresh’s own teaching. For some survivors Koresh’s death and the devastation of the community did not dim their expectation that God will judge a sinful world. While they wait in prayerful anticipation of that coming event, they endeavor to keep alive Koresh’s message and to spread it to a largely heedless public.

Within the broad biblical tradition, millennialism involves the interplay of three distinct elements: 1) the sacred text, which grounds the apocalyptic discourse of the teacher or group, 2) the inspired interpreter, who establishes which texts are most meaningful and how they are to be understood, and 3) the fluid context in which the interpreter of the apocalyptic tradition proposes readings of foundational texts, links them to specific events, and strives to persuade others of the accuracy of a particular apocalyptic scenario.¹ Although Koresh’s apocalyptic teaching ranged widely throughout the Bible, his grounding text² was the book of Revelation, particularly chapter four and five’s vision of an enthroned God holding a scroll with seven seals. Koresh, in fact, claimed that he was the “Lamb” mentioned in Revelation 6, the only one permitted to open the sealed scroll. Koresh saw himself not only as an inspired interpreter of the sacred text, but also as a crucial participant in its end-time scenario.

Koresh’s focus on Revelation remains steady in the major Branch Davidian theological texts produced after April 1993. The other two elements in the dynamic of biblical apocalypticism, however, have clearly

changed. Because Koresh was able to commit to writing only an introduction and an interpretation of the “first seal” of Revelation before his death,³ those who see themselves as continuing the Branch Davidian tradition must come to a judgment about the continuing authority of the now departed prophet. Some, I will argue, have raised Koresh’s interpretation to virtually canonical status. He is seen as having provided the last word on the meaning of Revelation, and his faithful acolytes have only to spread his message in its original form. Others, however, accord Koresh’s teaching a more limited authority; while important, it is not viewed as a final presentation of the meaning of Revelation. As Branch Davidians have come to grips with their new situation, they have turned again to the sacred text and sometimes to inspired interpreters. In particular, two recent texts demonstrate how Branch Davidians are wrestling with the dilemmas posed by their radically changed situation. While some have sought certainty and security in the codification and dissemination of Koresh’s teaching, others have embraced a new living prophet whose essential role in the end times is also believed to be outlined in the sacred text itself.

The imprisoned Branch Davidian Livingstone Fagan, who left Mount Carmel on 23 March to serve as a theological spokesperson for the community during the rest of the fifty-one day siege, has composed a number of occasional pieces as well as a short self-published book, *Mt. Carmel: The Unseen Reality* (1994). Fagan’s theology, especially in relation to the coming judgment, represents a Koreshian orthodoxy. Clearly subjugating himself to Koresh, whom he understands to be the Lamb mentioned in Revelation 6, Fagan asserts that “to know the seals you’re either a servant of the Lamb or the Lamb himself.”⁴ Fagan’s goal in *Mt. Carmel* is to re-present Koresh’s teachings in the hope of gaining more adherents before the final judgment.

Another text claiming to continue the Branch Davidian tradition presents a more complicated picture. *Seven Seals* (1998), attributed to an anonymous author identified only as the “Chosen Vessel,” is a more ambitious undertaking.⁵ Because nearly all of Koresh’s teaching was oral and only some of it has been captured on audiotapes, it is virtually impossible to determine *Seven Seals*’ degree of theological fidelity to Koresh’s original teaching. It is much clearer, however, that the Chosen Vessel (either Renos Avraam or Avraam/“Shekinah Koresh”) is lodging an innovative claim to status and authority, based on the contention that *Seven Seals* reveals the *other side* of the scroll with seven seals. In more than six hundred pages it offers a largely implicit critique of both Koresh and the Mount Carmel community, while simultaneously acknowledging Koresh’s crucial role in God’s plan for salvation. Most importantly, it presents the Chosen Vessel as an inspired prophetic successor to Koresh. The Chosen Vessel intends to rectify Koresh’s prophetic failings and unify the devastated community in preparation

for an imminent salvation. Thus, while Fagan is content in his writings to provide rather vague admonitions that the end is still near, the Chosen Vessel is deeply concerned with identifying when God's judgment will be exercised.⁶ As a result, *Seven Seals* frequently is given over to bouts of apocalyptic computation and chronology that attempt to demonstrate with unwavering certitude just how close we all are to God's judgment.

Each of these texts, in its own way, offers a glimpse at the attempts of a shattered community to hold true to its apocalyptic faith following the death of its prophet and teacher. They also disclose a community that is seeking to discover meaning in its troubling recent history, cope with the hostility and apathy of an unbelieving world, and prepare for even greater trials in the near future. Neither Fagan nor the Chosen Vessel abandons the millennial expectations that were nourished by Koresh. Neither entertains the possibility that Koresh's prophecy of the imminent judgment could have been anything other than an unprecedented insight into the meaning of the Christian scriptures. Despite the death of the prophet, prophecy itself has not failed. Despite the absence of the teacher, the message remains. In fact, both Fagan and the Chosen Vessel are convinced that the importance of Koresh's teaching after the destruction of the Mount Carmel Center is greater than it was before.

Mt. Carmel: the Unseen Reality and *Seven Seals* display both the persistence and the mutability of an apocalyptic tradition. The gruesome destruction of the Mount Carmel Center has not obliterated the Branch Davidian faith. In Fagan it has evoked an uncompromising steadfastness; in the Chosen Vessel it has given rise to a creative extension of the original message. In both books, the authors strive to make sense of their experience using the conceptual framework provided by their distinctive millennialist commitment. They arrive at positions in which any setbacks are only temporary, apparent defeat is in fact victory, and the ultimate goal of salvation remains tantalizingly close.

LIVINGSTONE FAGAN: *MT. CARMEL: THE UNSEEN REALITY*

Before he moved to the Mount Carmel Center, Livingstone Fagan was a Seventh-day Adventist theological student pursuing a Master's degree at Newbold College in England. The British citizen met Koresh in 1988, when Koresh gave a Bible study at the college.⁷ After three hours with Koresh, Fagan was deeply impressed. He recalls that "during that short time, I had perceived more significant biblical truths than I had done, the entire eight years I had been involved with organized religion."⁸ After completing his studies in December 1988, Fagan visited the Mount Carmel Center, and he made several more visits during the next four years. In 1992 he decided to move to Mount Carmel. Fagan

leaves no doubt that he found Koresh's teaching about the book of Revelation to be compelling:

On this last visit, approximately six months into our study, it was in our opinion impossible to leave without doing damage to our grasp of this continuing revelation of truth. We therefore decided to stay.⁹

Fagan dedicated his life to intensive study of the Bible at Mt. Carmel because it was a "place where David Koresh opened the Seven Seals."¹⁰

Fagan was profoundly affected by his brief tenure as a student of Koresh. Even after the fire, he attests that "I now live and breathe the truth of the Seven Seals and the future it envisions. A future according to the will of God. We have seen it, tasted it, now nothing else will do."¹¹ As one of the few survivors of the Mount Carmel community, Fagan feels that he has a specific mission. He claims that "I know of a certainty, that I am a recipient of God's saving work for this generation."¹² Concerning his major work, *Mt. Carmel: The Unseen Reality*, Fagan observes that "it has been challenging to find suitable language, in which to house the spirit of Mt. Carmel" but that "its effective communication, in lieu of the high cost of lives, has been something of a sacred concern to me."¹³

In both substance and style, *Mt. Carmel: The Unseen Reality* faithfully reiterates what Koresh taught. Most notably, it incorporates verbatim Koresh's entire unfinished manuscript on the seven seals. Nothing could signal more clearly Fagan's self-understanding as a "servant of the Lamb." Fagan has no desire to add to or in any way transform what Koresh taught; he believes that Koresh's teaching stands as the final word on the meaning of scripture. Whatever clarifying commentary Fagan adds to Koresh's exposition of the seven seals is expressed in a form very close to Koresh's teaching. For example, Fagan includes the entire text of the book of Revelation in his manuscript; yet he offers only minimal commentary on the biblical text, often letting whole chapters or groups of chapters pass before he offers a few observations. Similarly, Fagan incorporates the full texts of Psalms 22 and 40 and shorter excerpts from Psalms 45 (verses 1-4) and 127 (verses 3-5), also with little commentary. Fagan's reliance on Revelation likely stems from Koresh's assertion that "every book of the Bible meets and ends in the book of Revelation."¹⁴ Similarly, Fagan's appeal to the Psalms echoes Koresh's understanding of them as clarifying biblical prophecy in general and the seven seals in particular. Both Fagan and Koresh, for example, use Psalm 45 to explain the meaning of the first seal. Koresh typically assembled much more elaborate mosaics of texts from the prophets and psalms to support his interpretation of each seal, but Fagan at least follows his teacher's lead in beginning to construct a web of supporting references. The heart of Fagan's book, therefore, reproduces with remarkable fidelity both the substance of Koresh's teaching and the

distinctive way that he presented it. Outside of the autobiographical account that opens the book, what Fagan adds to Koresh's teaching is sequestered in a pair of appendices at the manuscript's end. There Fagan offers a series of brief philosophical reflections on religious themes including creation, the kingdom of God, inspiration, and righteousness, among others, and a pair of modern parables designed to reinforce his primary points. By locating his own reflections in appendices rather than in the body of the text, Fagan signals his intention that they be considered subordinate to Koresh's teaching, particularly as it is expressed in Koresh's exegesis of the seven seals.

The organization of *Mt. Carmel: The Unseen Reality* therefore reinforces Fagan's self-understanding as a "servant of the Lamb," one who is clearly secondary to an inspired interpreter. In fact, Fagan asserts that "whatever answers we offer, unless we are the Lamb, they amount to mere opinions and private interpretations."¹⁵ In both form and content, Fagan's representation of the message of the seven seals hews as closely as possible to Koreshian orthodoxy. Fagan never wavers from testifying to the unique role that Koresh has played in the economy of salvation. He writes that, "first of all, *only the Lamb can reveal the book*, whoever or whatever he is. Secondly, *he does reveal the book*. The information contained therein, is shown to His servants."¹⁶ Indeed, Fagan argues, the Lamb himself is the primary subject of the scriptures. Therefore, "the reason the Lamb alone was the only one considered worthy to reveal the book is because it contains God's thoughts about Him. Since He is the only one who knows God's thoughts, being one with God, who but He can reveal the book."¹⁷ Thus, in Fagan's presentation, only Koresh could achieve the status of an inspired interpreter of the text.

The teaching of the Lamb, Koresh, about himself and his role in God's judgment did, however, give Koresh's students a unique insight into human history and God's plans for salvation.¹⁸ Concerning the knowledge of the seven seals, Fagan observes that

this knowledge was designed to prepare the followers of Christ, living in the days the events in the sealed book come to pass, to cope. It is unfortunate that this truth has been neglected. The seals have indeed been opened, but this generation continues in its ignorance of them. A mere handful of people were present to learn the meaning of the seals. *The events themselves are to shortly come to pass*. They too will come upon the world unawares, consider Luke 21:20-22, 24-27, 34, 35; cf. Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1:3; Zechariah 8:1-3, 20-23; 14:1-12, 16-19; Ezekiel 36; Daniel 2:44; Matthew 5:14; II Peter 3; I Thes 4:14-5:4. It is no wonder under the sixth seal, the world seeks to hide itself from the one on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.¹⁹

The faithful are to "cope" in these last days by recognizing Koresh as the Lamb and by preparing faithfully for God's judgment by studying the seven seals.

In Fagan's view, then, accepting Koresh's teaching about the seven seals in itself constituted a "victory" for God. He has held to that viewpoint even after the fire. He writes that "the deaths of those who died at Mt. Carmel merely sealed God's victory. Those of us who remain alive in faith, are an open show of that victory. The kingdom of God can now be made manifest in the earth, the next event to shortly come to pass."²⁰ In fact, Fagan sees Mt. Carmel as having provided an object lesson for all humankind. He proposes that

in it's (*sic*) principal, the life style and conduct of Mt. Carmel, in addition to our experiences following February 28th, 1993, were a series of tests [. . .] designed of heaven, to address the question, HOW MUCH DO YOU LOVE GOD? This is a question to all of humanity, and predicate to receiving the new covenant (The Seven Seals, The mystery of God) reuniting humanity with God.²¹

Far from being demoralized, Fagan remains unshaken in his faith and in his acceptance of Koresh as the Lamb who opened the sealed scroll. He eagerly awaits his coming salvation, even though he refrains from setting a specific date for God's judgment. The heedlessness of sinful humanity is merely a bump in the road to salvation. Fagan holds fast to the conviction that "through our faith in this revealed truth, we are translated—first in mind, then in body—into the Kingdom. Our having to wait for the materialization of this promise, is a result of man's failure to come into the faith of it."²² Fagan leaves his readers armed with the message of the seven seals and forewarned concerning their imminent salvation.

THE CHOSEN VESSEL: *SEVEN SEALS*

The author of *Seven Seals* has chosen anonymity, preferring the title of "Chosen Vessel" to emphasize the prophet's authority. While the website on which the work appears claims to be the official site of "many" surviving Branch Davidians,²³ it provides no biographical information about the author, and *Seven Seals* itself offers no substantial autobiographical details. It is clear, however, that the Chosen Vessel's understanding of Koresh differs significantly from both Koresh's self-understanding and Fagan's interpretation of Koresh. Unlike Fagan, who accepted Koresh's teaching as the final word on the interpretation of scripture, the Chosen Vessel is not at all hesitant to present necessary "New Light." Moreover, *Seven Seals* presents the Chosen Vessel's teaching as required of all survivors. *Seven Seals* states clearly that

none are to take these words lightly, for the Chosen Vessel has revealed Truth according to the written Word of the Prophets, and of their testimony which is

recorded in scripture (*Thus saith the Lord*). All of those of the Remaining Bride [surviving Branch Davidians] MUST now support the Revelation of the Chosen Vessel and prophesy again as stated in Rev. 10:11; 11:3.²⁴

Given Koresh's long-standing insistence on his unique role in God's unfolding plan of salvation, the Chosen Vessel understandably anticipates that the message of *Seven Seals* may trouble the survivors of Mount Carmel.²⁵ But the Vessel also warns that "to reject the explanations contained in the Seven Seals . . . is to reject the Holy Spirit."²⁶ In effect, the Chosen Vessel claims to have replaced Koresh as the prophet and sole authoritative interpreter of scripture for the remnant of the Mount Carmel community. Just as during his life Koresh was the only one who could unlock the mysteries of the sealed scroll of Revelation 5, so now "there is only one chosen Vessel who has the Hidden Manna"²⁷ that will sustain the faithful until the end.

The Chosen Vessel's claim to succeed and even supersede Koresh is further reinforced by reference to a scriptural precedent. The Vessel asserts that

the Lamb and the Chosen Vessel of the remaining Bride are typified by Elijah and Elisha of the past. When Elijah was caught up to God, he left his mantle with Elisha, and Elisha was given a double portion of Elijah's spirit. In the latter day scenario, when the Man-child (*Lamb*) was caught up to God (*see Rev. 12:5*), the Lamb's wisdom was given in double portion to the Chosen Vessel who is of the Remaining Bride. The Chosen Vessel has the same wisdom of Prophecy within him in double portion, as he understands both sides of the double sided scroll; the one side which was revealed and fulfilled by the Lamb, and the second side which concerns the remaining Bride's destiny.²⁸

Throughout *Seven Seals* the Chosen Vessel claims to be both a successor to Koresh and a necessary improvement upon him. In neither instance is there the clear subordination evidenced in Fagan's text.

Seven Seals also enhances the status of the Chosen Vessel by frequently yet obliquely referring to Koresh's own shortcomings. The Vessel flatly states that "the Man-child (*Lamb*) did not fully fulfill the First Seal of Rev. 6:2 because the Lamb being a sinner went froward [*sic*] in the way of his heart, as stated in Is. 57:16-18, to save his people by bearing their sins instead of bringing judgment against them, see Is. 53:5; Ps. 89:50."²⁹ Certainly, one of the most challenging aspects of Koresh's self-understanding for his followers and outsiders alike was his claim to be a "sinful Messiah."³⁰ The Chosen Vessel, however, seizes upon that concept as a way of explaining the incomplete success of Koresh's mission. Koresh's bearing the sins of his community had a positive effect on their chances for salvation, but it kept him from fully accomplishing his mission of interpreting and putting into action each of the seven seals. Consequently, the message of the Chosen Vessel is absolutely necessary for salvation.

The Chosen Vessel's authority depends neither on the assent of the surviving community nor on any specific relationship to Koresh. As the name indicates, the Vessel has been singled out by God for a crucial teaching mission. The Vessel's authority is legitimated neither by bureaucratic nor by traditional means, but by charismatic endowment. The Vessel "was the first to receive the Little Scroll (*typified by John receiving it in Rev. 10:8-10*), being the Hidden Manna which are the prophecies that are written on the other side of the scroll that pertain to the remaining Bride's situation (*destiny*)."³¹ Although *Seven Seals* acknowledges Koresh's unprecedented accomplishment in opening the sealed scroll of Revelation 5, its acute awareness of what Koresh left undone leads to a reassessment of his status. Koresh remains a prophet and even the Lamb of Revelation 6, but his commentary on the seven seals can no longer stand alone.

The form of *Seven Seals* displays continuities with the written works of both Fagan and Koresh as well as some distinctive departures. It reprints nearly all of Revelation, specifically chapters 1-13, 17, and 19-20. But unlike Fagan, the Chosen Vessel offers extensive, though often repetitive, commentary on the biblical texts.³² Interspersed with the interpretation of Revelation are prolonged analyses of Ezekiel 1, 4-9, Hosea 1-3, Zechariah 1, 5, 6, nearly all of Daniel, and shorter sections of Isaiah, Ezekiel 47, and the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 31 and 32. The Chosen Vessel rarely resorts to providing large segments of uninterpreted biblical passages. *Seven Seals* is less a mosaic of self-interpreting biblical passages and more a theological commentary.

Seven Seals also signals its departure from Koreshian orthodoxy in two other ways. Most strikingly, it makes little explicit reference to Koresh's own treatment of the seven seals. Where Fagan incorporated Koresh's entire written work into *Mt. Carmel: the Unseen Reality* and clearly subordinated his own interpretation to Koresh's, the Chosen Vessel offers only a brief gloss on the poem "Eden to Eden" that begins Koresh's manuscript. Even then, the three-page consideration of Koresh's poem appears as an afterthought, coming after more than six-hundred pages of interpretations of the biblical texts. In many ways, the significance of Koresh for the Chosen Vessel lies in the past; Koresh's prophetic work is finished. Another inspired interpreter of the sacred text now addresses a new context with a Present Truth.

A second departure lies in *Seven Seals*'s prolonged attention to biblical texts about which neither Koresh nor Fagan wrote—although since Koresh committed very little of his oral teaching to writing it is difficult to gauge *Seven Seals*' degree of independence from Koresh's biblical interpretations. Some of the Vessel's choices, however, differ starkly from Fagan's. Where Fagan, through his autobiographical account of his arrest, trial, and continuing imprisonment, offered an unsparing indictment of the U.S. government, the Vessel has little to say directly

about the encounters between the Branch Davidians and the BATF, FBI, and court system. Instead, *Seven Seals* focuses relentlessly on the ignorance of Christendom. For example, with regard to the parable of the ten virgins in Matthew 25, the Vessel claims that “the leadership of Christendom are as the five foolish virgins having only the knowledge of the Christ of 2,000 years ago; and are without the extra knowledge of the latter day Lamb and the Chosen Vessel who are mentioned in the book of Daniel, Revelation, and in all the writings of the Prophets.”³³

The Chosen Vessel also offers an esoteric interpretation of creation to set God’s coming judgment in the broadest possible cosmic context. Although the treatment of creation in *Seven Seals* is complex and sometimes obscure, it hinges on two particular biblical passages. The Vessel asserts that Gen. 1:2’s description of the Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters is “a mystery which God kept hidden (*secret*) until the latter days when the Lamb with the Seven Seals would give the correct unfolding of the mysteries contained in the Word of God to his followers.”³⁴ The Vessel expresses the heart of that mystery in a simple set of propositions that “before the world we live in was formed, God had created a previous world. This world is a repeat of that former world. From the time of Adam and Eve and throughout all generations, our world has been a repeat of that former world.”³⁵ The relationship of the two worlds, however, is not that simple. As *Seven Seals* presents it, God’s attitude toward that first creation was essentially experimental. After creating Michael and Lucifer as the first beings in the universe, God learned that evil was a truly disruptive force in creation and as a result destroyed that first creation.³⁶ The second creation, however, involved more than the story preserved in Genesis. According to the Chosen Vessel, the water in Gen 1:2 represents the flood with which God destroyed the first creation, but the Vessel also links the separation of the waters in Gen. 1:6 to the formation of the sea of glass on which God’s throne rests in Rev. 4:6. In addition, the Vessel claims that the spirits of all beings on the earth during the first creation were placed in “angelic bodies” and now reside around the heavenly throne on the sea of glass.

Another fateful process took place among the heavenly retinue. The Chosen Vessel reports that “Lucifer, having been re-created perfect from the first creation, began to show signs of rebellion against God.”³⁷ In order to correct Lucifer, God had Michael intervene. *Seven Seals* records that “Michael then returned to the past; to the time when the earth was destroyed and covered by water . . . to re-create the earth and show Lucifer her past”³⁸ in the hopes that she would come to her senses. What Michael made and Lucifer saw is the world that we have lived in since Adam and Eve.

Lucifer, presumably, has been watching as human history has unfolded up to these latter days. The process of salvation involves a literal

return to the time of creation, as is indicated by the Vessel's second crucial biblical text, Rev. 19:20. The Chosen Vessel claims that

the lake of fire mentioned in Rev. 19:20 was the first earth's beginning, before the first creation of Michael and Lucifer was created. Our world being re-created at the point when the first earth was destroyed in a flood of waters, means we are heading backwards to the beginning of time. The time of this world is heading towards the lake of fire, as shown in Rev. 19:20. God is able to declare the end (*by a lake of fire*), from the beginning of Adam and Eve's creation, because every thing upon this earth is a repeat of the first creation upon the earth, see Isa. 46:10.³⁹

As history returns to its point of origin, "the city New Jerusalem descends at the Sixth Seal to gather the redeemed and leave the earth before the final plague destroys the earth."⁴⁰ The descent of the New Jerusalem ushers in a third creation when "God will make all things new. [And] the redeemed, with Michael and the New Lucifer (*Chosen Vessel*) will repopulate the universe from the very beginning again."⁴¹ Unlike the first two creations, the third will be a perfect "eternal paradise."⁴²

If the Chosen Vessel's treatment of creation provides a general framework for the understanding of human history, the Vessel's analysis of recent history since the destruction of Mount Carmel strives to identify precisely when the sixth seal will be enacted and God's judgment will be unleashed upon the earth. Identifying Koresh with the daily sacrifice mentioned in Daniel 8:11,⁴³ the Chosen Vessel argues that his death on 19 April 1993 definitively inaugurated the period of the last days: "from the time the Daily (*Lamb*) was taken away (*killed*) began the 2,300 days (*literal days*) which is how much time remains before the Sixth Seal is fulfilled."⁴⁴ That period is further subdivided into two distinct segments. During the first 1,040 days, while the surviving Branch Davidians and their teacher, the Chosen Vessel, remain in spiritual seclusion, the Babylonian beast recovers from the wound inflicted upon it by the Lamb. But after that period the survivors are transformed by the teaching of the new Elisha messenger. As *Seven Seals* describes it,

the remaining Bride who was taken into Babylonian captivity (*as stated in Dan. 11:33*), is given a Little Help, as seen in Dan. 11:34. The Little Help is the Little Scroll of Rev. 10:2, which the remaining Bride eats (*Hidden Manna of Rev. 2:17*); being the prophecies which are written on the other side of the scroll that prophesy of her (*Remaining Bride's*) destiny. The Chosen vessel (*typified by John in Rev. 10:8-10*) was the first to be given the Little Help (*understanding of prophecies*) that he may feed the Remaining bride therewith.⁴⁵

For the next forty-two months the remaining Bride and the Chosen Vessel spread the message of the seven seals in order to gather the 144,000 who are the first fruits of salvation. Near the end of that period, however, just before the enactment of the sixth seal, the faithful and their teacher

will be killed by the Babylonian beast, repeating what happened at the Mount Carmel Center. But since “the Lamb and the Chosen Vessel are the Two Witnesses who are written on each side of the scroll of Rev. 5:1 and 11:3,” they will resurrect after three-and-a-half days along with the 200,000,000 strong army of the saints, an event that will mark the end of the 2,300 day period.⁴⁶ The sixth seal will then be opened, five months of torment will be loosed upon the damned, and the redeemed will be gathered into the New Jerusalem. A rough calculation would then put God’s judgment early in August of 1999.⁴⁷

The Chosen Vessel stipulates a more precise dating of the end time than Fagan. While such calculations may well contribute to the maintenance of apocalyptic fervor, they can easily fall prey to the frustrations that have beset all other attempts at date setting throughout history. It seems clear, however, that the Chosen Vessel intends to give surviving Branch Davidians and any potential converts two rallying points. First, the Vessel confirms that the message of the seven seals has not lost any of its importance because of the destruction of Mount Carmel. It remains urgently relevant, since the days until God’s judgment are literally numbered. Second, the Vessel comforts the survivors who dedicated their lives to study with Koresh, assuring them that they are not bereft of a teacher. The Vessel can do for them now what Koresh did while he was alive: interpret the sacred text. Only the medium of the message about the seals has changed. Koresh relied extensively on oral Bible studies, often of truly prodigious length, and he hesitated to write down his interpretation of the seals until, just days before the final attack on Mount Carmel, he perceived that God had permitted him to commit his teaching to writing. Despite some very vivid pictorial renditions of the apocalyptic beasts of Daniel, the whore of Babylon, and fiery cherubim and seraphim, the Chosen Vessel relies extensively on the printed word, both on paper and in electronic form. In addition to the manuscript of *Seven Seals* the Vessel’s website maintains a continually accumulating set of questions and answers about the message of the seals. Each answer restates the message of the *Seven Seals* book.

The Chosen Vessel attempts to reinforce the apocalyptic convictions that led many of his readers to Mount Carmel in the first place. But instead of presenting Koresh as a unique interpreter of the sacred text, as Fagan had, the Chosen Vessel relativizes Koresh’s significance, supplements his revelation, and focuses upon a specific date for the impending events. The Vessel’s response to the devastation of Mount Carmel sharply differs from Fagan’s orthodoxy. For the Chosen Vessel neither the status nor the teaching of Koresh can remain inviolate; change is necessary and innovation is sanctioned by God. The Chosen Vessel’s message constitutes yet another revolution in a theological tradition stretching from Victor Houteff through Ben and Lois Roden to Koresh himself.⁴⁸ How the Vessel’s message and radical claim to

authority will be received, and what will become of the Vessel and the “New Light” on the seven seals since the judgment didn’t happen in August 1999 remain to be seen.

CONCLUSIONS

Mt. Carmel: the Unseen Reality and *Seven Seals* demonstrate that Branch Davidian theological speculation about the impending judgment has not only persisted but even flourished after the death of David Koresh. The persistence of the theological tradition, even without its being securely embedded in a social matrix like the Mount Carmel Center, has been supported by changes in the media which expresses that tradition to others. Although shorter messages were circulated to “branches” outside of Mount Carmel on audiotapes, Koresh’s lengthy Bible studies were primarily designed for face-to-face encounters with responsive audiences, as the brief moments of his teaching that have been preserved on videotape clearly indicate.⁴⁹ The oral nature of Koresh’s teaching gave him significant opportunity to change and adjust it as he saw fit. For Koresh, the transition to a written message was a momentous change, one that he could not undertake on his own. As he wrote in his final 14 April letter, only then and only through God’s direct intervention was he “being permitted to document, in structured form, the decoded message of the Seven Seals.”⁵⁰ The subsequent effects on the community of fixing in writing Koresh’s teaching about the seven seals can never be known. It is likely, however, that the presence of an authoritative “decoding” of the message of the seven seals would have imposed a potentially serious constraint on further theological innovation by introducing a second, textual, locus of authority in addition to Koresh’s own person. Koresh’s documenting his interpretation of the seven seals implicitly contained the seeds of the routinization of his own authority.

The way Fagan treats Koresh’s manuscript reinforces those impressions. Koresh’s written interpretation of the seven seals is the centerpiece of *Mt. Carmel: the Unseen Reality*. Fagan provides introductory and background material, virtually all designed to illustrate the significance of Koresh’s final work. Koresh’s book takes the place of the prophet himself. In Fagan’s presentation, the message of the seven seals is forever fixed. The status which he accords to Koresh’s manuscript is literally canonical; it becomes the yardstick by which any expression of the message of the seven seals must be measured. Fagan thus intimates a future in which Branch Davidian theology would be much less fluid and open to improvisation than it was while Koresh was delivering his oral Bible studies. For Fagan, prophetic authority is located securely in the past. Whether Fagan would go so far as to deny the possibility of new

Present Truth being vouchsafed to this or any future generation is difficult to discern from his current writings. But it is clear that even as he looks eagerly forward towards the end, Fagan also looks resolutely backwards to Koresh for the authoritative statement on how, why, and when that end will occur.

The Chosen Vessel presents a different situation. In addition to the Vessel's direct claims to inspiration and authority, the failure of *Seven Seals* to devote any significant attention to Koresh's manuscript signals that a very different sensibility is at work. *Seven Seals* capitalizes on the support for innovation inherent in the Adventist and Branch Davidian notion of Present Truth. From that perspective authority is never securely fixed in the past; the possibility of new revelation is ever-present, and the collection of authoritative texts always awaits new additions. The open-ended nature of authoritative interpretations of the message of the seven seals is further indicated by the constantly growing set of questions and answers on the website. The Chosen Vessel's theological innovation, like Fagan's orthodoxy, takes a textual form, but it is a form that is constantly open to, even eager for, new additions. In fact, there is nothing about *Seven Seals*, as it is currently organized, that precludes the incorporation of new or deletion of old material in successive editions. Just as *Seven Seals* portrays Koresh's "decoding" of the message of Revelation as a partial success, it suggests that its own interpretation is also open to further clarification and improvement. In the vision of the Chosen Vessel, no text from the past can hold final canonical authority because there is always the possibility that an inspired prophet could offer fresh clarifications of Present Truth. Only when human history itself comes to an end will the cumulative process of revelation be finished. *Seven Seals* thus enshrines the revolutionary power of charisma and remains theoretically open to its reappearance. *Mt. Carmel: the Unseen Reality*, on the other hand, evokes the organizing and standardizing power of routinization as it is expressed in the granting of canonical authority to one book only. Each text implies a path that a reconstituted Branch Davidian community could take in the years remaining before the final judgment. But the concrete sociological implications of the competing theological visions have yet to play themselves out.

The dilemmas confronted by Fagan and the Chosen Vessel are distinctive but not unique in the history of new religious movements. For example, at the end of a recent treatment of developments in Christian Science after the passing of its founder Mary Baker Eddy, John K. Simmons poses a provocative question. Noting that the board of directors of Christian Science implied a "rational/legal covenant story" in its interpretation of Eddy's set of bylaws entitled *Manual of the Mother Church*, but that a group that crystallized around Annie Bill's reading of the same document implied a "charisma covenant story," Simmons asks

Could the “two-story model” present in the history of Christian Science be applicable to other new religious movements? Specifically, upon the death of the prophet, does a successful routinization process demand that a sectarian group emerge that attracts those more emotive, innovative, energetic members away from the mainstream adherents? Occupying the “firebrands” of the movement with their own organizational process might facilitate the institutionalization of a rational/legal covenant in the dominant group.⁵¹

There are admittedly significant differences between the Christian Scientists and Branch Davidians, not least of which is the virtual destruction of the community along with the prophet in the latter case. A vital Branch Davidian community, either along the lines of the Mount Carmel Center or in some new organizational form, has not yet been reconstituted. Accordingly, Branch Davidian theology is not now strongly connected to any form of community life in which the process of routinization could be traced. Nonetheless, Simmons’ question remains intriguing. *Seven Seals* and *Mt. Carmel: the Unseen Reality* do imply very different solutions to the dilemmas of a dead prophet and a shattered community. One strongly depends on the continuing eruption of charismatic authority, while the other transfers authority to a fixed text that presents the final teachings of a departed prophet. Concrete interactions between those espousing each of the two options cannot easily be identified in the case of the Branch Davidians, but it is clear that the tensions between charisma and routinization are playing themselves out among the students of the seven seals just as they did among the followers of Mary Baker Eddy. Neither Fagan nor the Chosen Vessel expects those tensions to persist for long, given the imminence of God’s judgment, but in the meantime they will continue to shape the lives and expectations of the faithful remnant that awaits the apocalypse.

ENDNOTES

¹ On this understanding of apocalypticism see James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 8–9.

² On the notion of a “grounding text” see Barry Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1991), 99–116.

³ For Koresh’s text and a commentary on it by James Tabor and Phillip Arnold, see Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 189–211.

⁴ Livingstone Fagan, *Mt. Carmel: The Unseen Reality* (1994), part 2, 6. Fagan’s book, along with several of his other writings, is available from Mark Swett’s website devoted to the Branch Davidians: <<http://home.maine.rr.com/waco>>. Swett posts Fagan’s book in two parts; I provide references to both the part and the page number within the part. Fagan continues to write in prison, but the failure of a resurrected David Koresh to return in 1996, as many survivors expected, has not yet decisively influenced Fagan’s theology.

⁵ *Seven Seals* can be downloaded from <www.branchdavidian.com> or <www.sevensseals.com>. A hard copy can also be ordered from either of those sites, which bill themselves as “the official website of many Branch Davidian survivors who were with David Koresh during the 51-day siege at Mt. Carmel center.” *Seven Seals* is divided into two books with non-consecutive pagination. References will thus be given to the book and the page within that book.

Although the book itself is anonymous and identification of the author from the text of *Seven Seals* is complicated by the switching back and forth from masculine to feminine pronouns, James Tabor, Mark Swett, and others attribute it to Mount Carmel survivor Renos Avraam, who is now serving a ten-year sentence in Federal prison for his participation in the 28 February 1993 shoot-out between the BATF and the Branch Davidians. Avraam has been aided in the composition of *Seven Seals* by his spiritual “wife,” the former Leslie Eddy of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who now identifies herself as “Shekinah Koresh.” She met Avraam and converted to the Branch Davidian faith some two years after the destruction of Mount Carmel. Mark Swett notes on his website that Avraam’s “work has proved to be divisive among the survivors.” Swett posts a letter from survivor Catherine Matteson to Avraam (dated 18 March 1997) in which Matteson informs Avraam and “Shekinah Koresh” that “neither of you understand the 7 Seals. You are not teaching the 7 Seals or any of David’s message. You are leading people into perdition who follow your so called message.” James Tabor (private communication, 10 March 1999) observes that “none of the core group remaining at Waco, now more or less held together by Clive Doyle, has accepted their message.”

⁶ In two short essays available in Mark Swett’s electronic archive of Branch Davidian materials (see note 4), Marc Breault discusses Davidian calculations of the end and their expectations for the return of Koresh. Breault was close to Koresh until he left the group in September 1989 after Koresh introduced his controversial teachings about the necessity for group celibacy and his personal sexual monopoly over all the women in the group. In “The Return of David Koresh” (1995), Breault reports that “many Branch Davidians expect David Koresh to ‘return,’” most likely after a period of 1,335 days as indicated in Daniel 12:12 (p. 1). In “Vernon Howell and the 1995 Deadline” (1992), Breault notes that “Vernon [Breault does not recognize Howell’s adopted name of David Koresh] wavered in belief between ending it all in 1995, and starting the countdown to the end in that year. However, in countless studies, especially beginning in 1987, Vernon went over Psalm 90 as I have described it here, leading most to believe that God’s kingdom would begin in 1995” (p. 5). In “The Return of David Koresh,” however, Breault describes alternative calculations of the time of the end, all based on passages in either Daniel 8 or 12 that range from 12 June 1996 to 6 August 1999 (see pp. 4–5). Breault’s essays show that discussion about the time of the end or at least the beginning of the end was very much a part of Koresh’s teaching and Branch Davidian speculation. Given his theological training and his status within the group, Fagan cannot have been unaware of such thinking. He has, however, chosen not to take up the topic of dating the end in his theological writings since 19 April 1993. Whether Fagan’s refusal to take up the question of the date of the end represents a concern about misunderstanding by outsiders, a split between more private and more public teachings, or the lingering effects of cumulative disappointments is difficult to determine at this point. At any rate, Fagan’s reticence in his “published” works stands in stark contrast to the Chosen Vessel’s deep involvement in date setting.

⁷ On Koresh’s Bible Studies see Eugene V. Gallagher, “‘Theology is Life and Death’: David Koresh on Violence, Persecution, and the Millennium,” in *Violence, Persecution, and the Millennium: Historical Cases*, ed. Catherine L. Wessinger (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 82–100.

⁸ Fagan, *Mt. Carmel*, 1:5. I retain Fagan’s occasionally idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:15.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 1:2.

¹² Ibid., 1:3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ David Koresh, “The Seven Seals of the book of Revelation,” as printed in Tabor & Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 197.

¹⁵ Fagan, *Mt. Carmel*, 1:25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 2:6. My emphasis.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2:14.

¹⁸ See *ibid.*, 2:35.

¹⁹ Ibid., 2:5. My emphasis.

²⁰ Ibid., 2:8–9.

²¹ Ibid., 2:32.

²² Ibid., 2:37.

²³ See note 5.

²⁴ *Seven Seals*, 1:303. I retain all punctuation, emphases, and spellings from the original unless otherwise noted.

²⁵ See *ibid.*, 1:54.

²⁶ Ibid., 1:I.

²⁷ Ibid., 1:274–75.

²⁸ Ibid., 2:85.

²⁹ Ibid., 2:4; see also 1:292.

³⁰ See Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 56–57, 96.

³¹ *Seven Seals*, 1:253.

³² Interspersed with the interpretation of Revelation are prolonged analyses of Ezekiel 1, 4–9, Hosea 1–3, Zechariah 1, 5, 6, nearly all of Daniel, and shorter sections of Isaiah, Ezekiel 47, and the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 31 and 32.

³³ *Seven Seals*, 1:3.

³⁴ Ibid., 1:13.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ See *ibid.*, 1:31.

³⁷ Ibid., 1:12. The chart on 1:12 presents the complicated account of the two creations in summary form.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., 1:33.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., 1:28.

⁴³ The Branch Davidians’ understanding of Koresh as the “daily,” however, was not specifically sacrificial. In “The Return of David Koresh,” Marc Breault reports that “Koresh felt that he was the ‘daily’” and that “Koresh believed that the Christ spirit dwelt in him” (p. 3). What was important about Koresh, then, was that he personally enshrined the living spirit of prophecy. As Breault remarks, “Koresh simply followed old Branch Davidian tradition. He saw himself as the true tabernacle, one in a long line of true tabernacles which included the Protestant reformers and the Davidian and Seventh-day Adventist prophets” (*ibid.*).

⁴⁴ *Seven Seals*, 1:82. The sole emphasis on the period of 2,300 days is distinctive in *Seven Seals*, which was, of course, published after all of the possible dates of the end, from 1,150 to 1,335 days after Koresh’s death, had already passed.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 1:84. My emphasis on “the other side of the scroll.”

⁴⁶ Ibid., 1:87.

⁴⁷ In “The Return of David Koresh,” Marc Breault specifies the date as 6 August 1999. In “The 1,335 Day Prophecy of Daniel and Revelation,” a recent addition to the www.sevenseals.com website, the Chosen Vessel moves toward a spiritual interpretation of the August 1999 date for the end. The Vessel claims, for example, that “the rebellious Angels are being slain in heaven to cleanse the spiritual sanctuary of heaven after the 2,300 days had expired. This takes place before the cleansing of the spiritual sanctuary on this earth, see Is. 34:5” (p. 5).

⁴⁸ On the history of the Davidian and Branch Davidian movements see Tabor and Gallagher, *Why Waco?*, 33–43. See also William L. Pitts, Jr., “Davidians and Branch Davidians: 1929–1987,” in *Armageddon in Waco: Critical Perspectives on the Branch Davidian Conflict*, ed. Stuart A. Wright (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 20–42.

⁴⁹ Videotape originally made for the Australian television program “A Current Affair” was widely broadcast at the time of the siege on the Mount Carmel Center. Many of the news programs and films about the Branch Davidians and the siege contain brief snippets of that footage.

⁵⁰ As quoted in Tabor and Gallagher, 15.

⁵¹ John K. Simmons, “Charisma and Covenant: the Christian Science Movement in its Initial Postcharismatic Phase,” in *When Prophets Die: the Postcharismatic Fate of New Religious Movements*, ed. Timothy Miller (Albany: SUNY Press, 1991), 122.