

32 Apocalypse at Waco

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Some alternative religions have conflicted with legal authorities. Tabor recounts his efforts to better understand the worldview of the Branch Davidians and communicate it to the FBI.

The government doesn't understand, I said to myself as I watched the drama of the Branch Davidians at Waco, Texas, unfold on CNN day after day. Was there anything I could do to help, I wondered. As my frustration mounted, I decided to offer my services to the FBI, which by this time had taken over the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. It was clear to me that the drama at Mt. Carmel, as David Koresh called his Branch Davidian compound, was being played out as a fulfillment of the New Testament Book of Revelation—and the authorities were dangerously ignorant of the apocalyptic world in which David Koresh was living.

I first called my friend Philip Arnold, director of Reunion Institute in Houston, Texas, who was physically closer to the scene than I. I told him that I thought we could be of help. Like me, Phil has a Ph.D. in New Testament and has specialized in both ancient and modern apocalypticism.

He shared my assessment of the situation and we agreed to present ourselves to the FBI as a team—experts in the Bible, apocalypticism, and especially the Book of Revelation.

The FBI welcomed our assistance. It was obvious that, whatever their expertise in siege warfare, they knew little about the Bible.

7:25 Sunday evening, February 28, 1993. CNN anchorman David French is conducting a live interview on a phone hookup. I rush to the TV set. It is David Koresh, his voice edged with an appealing intensity. A photo of the young man with glasses and long wavy hair, which was later to become familiar around the world, is on the screen against a backdrop of a map of Texas with a place marked as "Mt. Carmel," near Waco. (Earlier that day, at 9:55 in the morning to be exact, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms had raided Mt. Carmel, resulting in a two-hour gun battle with the

Branch Davidians that left four ATF agents dead and 16 more wounded.) A steady stream of biblical quotations is issuing from the voice at Waco. Koresh is talking about the Seven Seals from the Book of Revelation. French, on the other hand, keeps trying to get Koresh to talk about the morning raid—how many cult members had been killed or wounded and whether he planned to surrender. Koresh admits that he is badly wounded, that his two-year-old daughter was killed and that others from his group were killed and wounded. It is clear that Koresh wants mainly to quote Scripture, mostly the Book of Revelation. He was the Lamb, he said, chosen to open the Seven Seals.

The phone conversation over CNN went on for about 45 minutes. I was utterly mesmerized. If this was the world Koresh was living in, neither his own death nor that of his followers would hold any dread for him. It was then that I decided the authorities might need some help.

“Koresh,” the name that David had legally adopted for himself, is Hebrew for Cyrus, the name of the ancient Persian king who destroyed the Babylonian empire in 539 B.C.E. Almost 50 years earlier (in 686 B.C.E.), the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and God’s house, the Temple built by King Solomon. Cyrus, or Koresh, was an Israelite hero: He not only defeated the mighty Babylonian empire, but soon thereafter permitted the Jews to return from Exile and rebuild their Temple.

As I listened to Koresh quoting from Revelation, I was almost dizzied by the incongruity of it all: Here we were in 1993 and this young Cyrus, would-be challenger of modern Babylon, was actually delving into the details of the Book of Revelation on prime time over a worldwide television network. I pulled out a Bible and turned to Isaiah 45, where the ancient Persian king Cyrus was addressed by God himself:

“Thus says the Lord to Cyrus (*Koresh*) his anointed whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes.” (Isaiah 45:1)

Here Cyrus is actually called “messiah.” The Hebrew word is *mashiach*, which simply means one who is anointed. In biblical times both the high priests and the kings of Israel were anointed in a ceremony in which oil was poured over the head and beard (see Psalm 133). The Greek translation of the Hebrew *mashiach* is “Christos,” from which we get our term “Christ.” In this sense, one could accurately say that this ancient Persian king was called Christ. But in this general sense of the term, the Bible speaks of many christs or messiahs, not just one. Indeed, the word came to refer to anyone who was especially selected by God for a mission, as was the Persian king Cyrus. David Koresh was claiming to be such a christ.

This biblical terminology led to endless confusion and miscommunication between the secular media and the FBI on the one hand, and the followers of Koresh, who lived and breathed these ancient texts, on the other. It was widely but incorrectly reported, even by the most responsible media, that David Koresh claimed to be Jesus Christ, or even God himself. But he was in fact claiming to be a messiah, or christ, in the same sense that his namesake Koresh (Cyrus) was messiah or christ—one chosen by God for a special mission. If his words were interpreted in terms of the apocalyptic world he inhabited, he never believed, or claimed, that he was Jesus Christ.

Koresh believed that he was the one chosen to open the Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation and thereby bring about the downfall of “Babylon.” The opening of the mysterious Seven Seals in the last book of the New Testament led, in an apocalyptic sequence, to the Day of Judgment and the end of the world.

The Greek word *apocalypsis* means “to uncover, to reveal.” The Book of Revelation is called the Apocalypse. An apocalyptic group believes that the end of history is near and that the signs and secrets of the final scenario have been revealed to them. The followers of Jesus were an apocalyptic movement within ancient

Judaism. So were the people who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Since the third century B.C.E., many such groups, first Jewish and later Christian, proclaimed the imminent “end of the world” on the basis of their understanding of prophetic texts in the Bible. Phil Arnold and I were convinced that any chance for a peaceful resolution of the crisis at Waco would require an understanding of the apocalyptic world in which David Koresh and his dedicated followers were living. They were clearly willing to die for what they believed, and they would not surrender under threat of force.

In our initial contact, the FBI admitted to being hopelessly confused by Koresh’s lengthy expositions of Scripture, which were occurring regularly in their daily telephone negotiations. One FBI agent told us how he and his colleagues had been frantically reading through the Book of Revelation in the Gideon Bibles in their hotel rooms. The image struck me as almost comical, but at the same time frightening. The agent also told us they found the Book of Revelation and David Koresh’s extended biblical monologues wholly incomprehensible. “What is this about the Seven Seals?” they wanted to know. One agent thought the seals were amphibious animals with whiskers; after all, there were a lot of other animals—lions, oxen, eagles, horses, wild beasts, even monsters—in the book. Why not seals?

In the next few weeks, Phil and I spent hours talking with Livingston Fagan, an articulate member of the Branch Davidians whom Koresh had allowed out of the compound as a spokesperson. Fagan was being held in jail. From these conversations, in which the three of us examined the biblical texts quite closely and often technically, Phil and I slowly began to understand how Koresh was interpreting them: The Branch Davidian group understood itself to be living through the opening of the Seven Seals, leading to the Day of Judgment and the end of time and the world. The Seven Seals are on a scroll held by the one who is

seated on the heavenly throne. Each of the seals, stamped in wax, can be opened only by a figure variously referred to as the Lamb, the anointed one (in other words, messiah or christ) or the Branch of David. David Koresh claimed to be this person.

In Jewish tradition, the Messiah will be a descendant of David, literally the branch of David. That is why in Matthew and Luke, containing the genealogies of Jesus, he is descended from King David. That is also why David Koresh’s group is called the Branch Davidians. And that is why Vernon Howell from Houston, Texas, chose the first name David when he changed his name to David Koresh and traced his own ancestry to King David. Koresh saw himself as he who was sent to the world before the end of the age, empowered to remove the seals and open the scroll.

Psalms 45, which Koresh understood to refer to himself, speaks of a mighty king, anointed by Yahweh (in this sense the *mashiach*, or messiah), who rides victoriously, marries princesses and fathers many sons who will rule the earth (Psalm 45:4–7, 10–16). This psalm is the source of Koresh’s sexual exploits. He had sexual intercourse with the wives of his male followers, forbidding the husbands from doing likewise to ensure that the seed was his. According to his interpretation of Psalm 45, these sons would be “princes in all the earth” (Psalm 45:16). In his mind, Koresh was the Branch of David who was to build up a dynasty that would someday rule the world (Jeremiah 23:3–5).

David Koresh believed that he had already opened the first four seals of the Seven Seals described in the Book of Revelation and that the Branch Davidians were now in the fifth seal.

The Book of Revelation is written as a vision of John, who describes what he saw in the first person. Here is how he describes the opening of the fifth seal:

“When he [the Lamb] opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the witness

they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, 'O, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on earth?' Then they were each given a white robe and told to wait *a little longer*, until the number would be complete of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters who were *soon to be killed* as they themselves had been killed" (Revelation 6:9–11).

We discussed the chilling implications of these verses with the FBI. For Koresh and his group, the Book of Revelation was like a script, setting forth in vivid detail that would transpire in instructing them what they should do. They refused to come out of their compound because God was telling them in these verses to wait "a little longer." But the verse goes on to predict that they, like the others who had been killed in the AFT raid on February 28, would also be killed. They were thus doomed to die—unless they could be persuaded that they were misinterpreting these passages.

Speaking of the February 28 raid, Koresh later told an AFT agent: "I knew you were coming before you knew you were coming."

On the morning of that raid Koresh told an undercover AFT agent who was spying on the group and whom David suspected was a federal agent, "What thou doest, do quickly" (John 13:27). It was as if the entire situation in Waco was locked into a predetermined pattern, set forth in a book written around 96 C.E., during the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian.

If Koresh were living "in the fifth seal," did that make it inevitable that the remaining men, women and children in the Mt. Carmel compound must also die? Would they provoke a violent end simply because they felt it was the predetermined will of God, moving things along to the sixth seal, which was the great Judgment Day of God?

Koresh insisted to the FBI that God had told him to "wait" an unspecified time. The FBI, impatient and frustrated, pushed him, asking "how long?" The entire drama was being played out according to a biblical script.

The Book of Revelation presented—and presents—two major difficulties. First, it is written in veiled, symbolic language, lending itself to countless interpretations, often wild and uncontrolled by the normal tenets of biblical exegesis. Second, it contains unequivocal statements about the impending end of the age that were never literally fulfilled and thus demand constantly revised interpretation. Ironically, these two problems probably led the book's inclusion in the canon, as well as its preservation and popularity. The imprecise symbolic language allowed for continuous revisions of interpretations and ingenious reapplications to subsequent periods and situations. In short, the Book of Revelation became a timeless script of the end-time scenario, ever flexible and mobile through time and place. It has provided countless movements and groups with interpretations of their own situations and has fueled the hopes, dreams and schemes of a perpetually revised apocalyptic agenda.

Gradually, Phil Arnold and I had fleshed out the apocalyptic scenario or script that David Koresh and his followers were expecting. We were absolutely convinced that Koresh would never surrender to pressure or harassment—which was what the FBI was doing, cutting off the compound's water and electricity, blaring painfully loud noise and beaming high-intensity floodlights at the members day and night to prevent sleep, threatening them, doing anything to make their lives miserable. Given Koresh's understanding of himself as the messenger or anointed one, who had been appointed to open the Seven Seals, he would act only as he felt God was leading him. And the text of the Book of Revelation was his primary guide.

Slowly Phil and I formulated a plan to approach Koresh with an alternative scenario, seeking to meet him within his own interpretive world. We had to convince him that within the context of his apocalyptic, properly interpreting his apocalyptic texts, especially Revelation, there was an alternative path, something else he

should be doing. We would try to convince him that he was not “in the fifth seal”—which would mandate the death of the group. We would argue that “a little longer” (or “little season”) in Revelation 6:11, after which they would be killed, could be interpreted as a very extended period. In short, death was not necessarily imminent. For this, we would rely on Revelation 7:1–3, which, if read literally, implies a considerable delay: “Four angels standing at the four corners of the earth [hold] back the four winds of the earth...[and] another angel... with the seal of the living God... [says] to the four angels that had been given the power to harm,... ‘Do not harm... till we have sealed the servants of our God upon their foreheads.’”

We would also rely on Revelation 10: An angel has “a little scroll”; the angel swears there will be no more delay. A voice tells the author to take the scroll. He does so, but the angel with the scroll tells him to eat it, that it will be bitter in his stomach and sweet in his mouth. He eats, and it is as the angel had said. Then he is commanded to prophesy, presumably based on the content of the scroll, to “many peoples and nations and tongues and kings.” We would try to convince Koresh that he must first write this scroll and transmit it to the people.

The next question was how best to engage him in a discussion of Revelation and its proper interpretation. One suggestion was that we send in a tape addressed to Koresh. Another involved a local radio talk show, hosted by Ron Engleman. Koresh and his followers tuned in to this show each morning on their battery-operated transistor radios. Koresh liked Engleman, who had been very critical of the ATF for the way it had handled the raid of February 28 in which Koresh’s two-year-old daughter and five other Branch Davidians as well as four federal agents, had been killed. Indeed, Koresh has a banner hung from the compound saying “We want Ron.” We decided this would be the better way to reach Koresh, at least initially:

Phil and I would talk about the text of Revelation and its interpretation on Ron Engleman’s talk show. Engleman agreed to give us full use of air time, and Dick DeGuerin, Koresh’s attorney, who had been meeting with Koresh regularly, assured us that Koresh and his followers would listen to our discussion.

On April 1, 1993, in give-and-take-dialogue form, we went live on the air and presented a rather technical discussion of an alternative interpretation of the Book of Revelation that we thought David Koresh might accept. Our approach was hypothetical: Given Koresh’s general worldview and the interpretation he was following of the Seven Seals, was there a reasonable alternative understanding? The show went well, we thought. Just to make sure he heard it, we sent a tape of the discussion into the compound with Koresh’s lawyer DeGuerin, so Koresh and his followers could study it if they wished. April 1 was a Thursday.

The following Wednesday, after his Passover celebration, Koresh dictated a letter to DeGuerin. It wasn’t clear just how much of our interpretation he had bought, but it was clear that he was now going to write up the decoded message of the Seven Seals and that he would then “come out.”

“I am presently being permitted [by God] to document in structured form the decoded messages of the Seven Seals. Upon the completion of this task, I will be freed of my waiting period. I hope to finish this as soon as possible and stand before man and answer any and all questions regarding my activities... [The writing of these seals will cause the winds of God’s wrath to be held back a little longer. ... I have been shown that as soon as I am given over to the hands of man, I will be made a spectacle of and people will not be concerned about the truth of God, but just the bizarrry of me in the flesh. ... I am working night and day to complete my final work of writing out these seals. I thank my father. He has finally granted me this chance to do this. ... 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. ... We are standing on the threshold of great events. The Seven Seals in written form are the most sacred information ever.”

Phil and I were of course elated.

Unfortunately, the FBI's reaction was different. The FBI simply stepped up its pressure tactics, demanding once and for all that Koresh and his people surrender. They thought Koresh was simply stalling, as they claimed he had done in the past. Passover, an eight-day Jewish holiday celebrating the freeing of the Israelite slaves from Egyptian bondage, had just ended. Earlier Koresh had said that after Passover he would announce his plan for surrender. Koresh had unintentionally irritated the FBI because each day of the holiday, he announced that it was Passover. Some FBI agents thought Passover was a one-day holiday, the date of which Koresh was changing every day. In their daily press briefings, the FBI belittled Koresh as a grade-school dropout who would hardly be capable of writing a book. They characterized him as a manipulating madman who thought he was God and who interpreted the Bible through the barrel of a gun.

Nevertheless, the FBI allowed writing supplies, including typewriter ribbons, to be delivered to the Mt. Carmel compound. They did this as late as Sunday evening, April 18, the very evening before the final assault. At 5:50 Monday morning, they called the compound and informed the group that if they did not surrender the place would be gassed. Steve Schneider, Koresh's spokesman, was so upset by this sudden shift in plans that he ripped the compound's phone from the wall and threw it out the window. A few minutes after six, an armored combat engineer vehicle with a steel nose began to nudge the corner of the compound. A second soon joined in, buckling the walls. A tank crashed through the front door. Tear gas enveloped the buildings. Rounds of bullets rained down on the attackers. Shortly after noon, explosions rocked the compound as ammunition stores blew up. Fire soon mingled with the tear gas as 30-mile-per-hour winds turned the scene into an inferno. By evening, 86 people, including David Koresh and two dozen children, were dead. The 51-day

siege had ended. Like Jesus, David Koresh was 33 years old when he died, and, again like Jesus, he died at about Passover time.

One of the few survivors told me the last time he saw David Koresh was about 5 a.m. that morning. David had come down from his room and looked very tired. He said he had been working most of the night on his manuscript on the Seven Seals.

We can only speculate what Koresh must have thought when the attack came, as the buildings shook and the walls were punched with holes and tear gas injected. My own view is that, given his mindset, he can only have concluded he was in the fifth seal after all, and that the remaining Davidians must now die like all the others. The FBI's attack must have forced David to revise his most recent apocalyptic understanding. Given this recent turn of events, there was absolutely no chance that he or his followers would "come out and surrender to proper authority," as the FBI loudspeakers demanded that morning. To Koresh and his followers, the only proper authority was God, not the forces of the wicked Babylonians. In their minds, based on Revelation 6:11, they saw their deaths as a necessary martyrdom, a self-sacrifice that would lead to the final collapse of the enemy and the coming of Jesus Christ.

I have not the slightest doubt that David Koresh would have surrendered peacefully had he been allowed to finish his manuscript. Shortly after fire consumed the compound, some federal agents said they doubted that Koresh was even working on a manuscript. They took what Koresh had said about God's allowing him to write the interpretation of the Seven Seals as a ploy to delay matters still further. We now know this was not the case. Ruth Riddle, one of the few survivors, had a computer disk in the right pocket of her jacket when she escaped. She had been typing David's handwritten manuscript the day before the attack. On the disk was his exposition of the first seal. The disk is now in the possession of the federal authorities.