

Armageddon

Edited by

STUART A. WRIGHT

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in Waco

*Critical
Perspectives
on the
Branch
Davidian
Conflict*

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JAMES D. TABOR

Religious Discourse and Failed Negotiations

*The Dynamics of Biblical
Apocalypticism at Waco*

The very evening of the initial BATF raid on the Mt. Carmel Center outside Waco, on Sunday, February 28, 1993, the wounded leader of the Branch Davidian group, David Koresh, spoke several times by live telephone hookup over Dallas radio station KRLD and CNN cable television. Koresh began, in those initial gripping interviews, the first of hundreds of hours of explanations, based on his understanding of the biblical apocalyptic significance of the situation in which

he found himself. His last live public communication was given over KRLD at 1:50 that Monday morning.¹ It is ironic, but true, that in those initial live interviews Koresh offered the basic clues to an understanding of the perspective of the Branch Davidians,² which had it been properly grasped, could very likely have led to a peaceful resolution of the standoff. Unfortunately, neither the FBI agents in charge, nor the myriad of advisors upon whom they relied, were prepared to comprehend the religious dynamics of the situation from such a perspective.

By Monday morning, March 1, the FBI had already been summoned and was in the process of taking over operations from the BATF. FBI Special Agent Jeffrey Jamar, from San Antonio, Texas, had taken command of the situation. The FBI's fifty-person Hostage Rescue Team (HRT), a counterterrorist unit, was preparing to arrive. The standoff had already been classified by the FBI, even at that early date, as a Complex Hostage Barricade Rescue Situation. Negotiators and tactical personnel were put in place, and a method of interchange with the Branch Davidians was initiated. One can hardly expect that the federal agents called to the area that day would think to pack their Bibles, or have had time to brush up on the book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament. But from those initial live interviews with David Koresh over KRLD and CNN, one who knew the biblical texts and listened carefully to what the Davidian leader said would have been able to understand the predicament from a wholly different perspective than that of the government's "Hostage Rescue" approach. For the Branch Davidians, no one was a hostage, and these same federal agents represented an evil governmental system, referred to in the book of Revelation as "Babylonian." Given this understanding, the idea of "surrendering to proper authority," as the government demanded throughout the next seven weeks, was absolutely out of the question. As they saw it, their group had been wantonly attacked and slaughtered by government agents whom they understood to be in opposition to both God and his anointed prophet.

As I have argued elsewhere (Tabor 1993, 1994), the Waco situation could have been handled differently, and resolved peacefully. This is not unfounded speculation or wishful thinking; it is also the considered opinion of many others trained in the academic study of religion who understand the dynamics of such biblical apocalyptic belief systems as that of the Branch Davidians (see Ammerman 1993; Arnold 1994; Lewis 1994; Sullivan 1993). There was a proper and clear way to communicate with these religious people, but it had nothing to do with hostage rescue or counterterrorist tactics. Indeed, a peaceful

strategy was being pursued, with FBI cooperation, by Phillip Arnold of the Reunion Institute in Houston and by me, in concert with lawyers Dick DeGuerin and Jack Zimmerman (who spent twenty hours inside the Mt. Carmel Center directly communicating with David Koresh) and Koresh's main spokesperson, Steve Schneider. Unfortunately, it came too late, and by the time it began to produce results, decisions had already been made in Washington to end the siege by force.

In the KRLD conversations Koresh was urged repeatedly by the station manager to surrender and get medical attention, and he was continually asked whether he would allow more children to come out. Koresh, in response, launched into a detailed exposition of his message, quoting biblical passages and trying to explain his view of the situation. What he tried to communicate obviously went over the head of the station manager, and one would presume it was largely incomprehensible to much of the radio audience. Koresh was a master at his own form of biblical exegesis. His message was systematic, consistent, and internally logical when understood within the theological perspective of the Branch Davidians. However, to one untutored in the details of the prophetic portions of the Bible, this message, delivered in his typical nonstop style, with lengthy quotations from the King James Version, would appear nonsensical. Among the many points he made in those initial conversations on KRLD, two stand out as vital for understanding the standoff from his perspective. First, he told his live audience, "We are now in the fifth seal," and second, he said that Psalm 2, and potentially, Psalm 89, were about to be fulfilled. If anyone at that point had been able to converse intelligently with Koresh about these two topics, much needless frustration and perhaps further deaths could have been avoided.

According to FBI records, during the fifty-one-day period negotiators spoke with fifty-four individuals inside Mt. Carmel for a total of 215 hours. There were 459 conversations with Steve Schneider, which consumed ninety-six hours. Koresh spoke with authorities 117 times—a total of sixty hours (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 10–11). The Justice Department's report indicates that the conversations with Koresh were, as often as not, monologues in which he preached nonstop, sometimes for as long as two or three hours at a time. Although the tapes of these "negotiations" have not been made public, the Justice Department's report provides liberal samples of the style and content of Koresh's attempts to communicate with authorities. For example, on March 7 Koresh was on the phone with them from 12:11 A.M. until 3:15 A.M., just over three hours. The FBI

notes that his delivery of "religious rhetoric was so strong that they could hardly interrupt him to discuss possible surrender" (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 57–58). The report laments that Koresh "refused to discuss any matters of substance" and merely insisted on "preaching" to negotiators (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 54–55). What the authorities never perceived was that Koresh's preaching was precisely such to him, the only matter of substance and means through which to work out a "surrender." One detects, in reading through the Justice Department's log of events, an increasing level of frustration in dealing with Koresh by the second week of March (see Stone 1993). On March 9, a series of pressure tactics were initiated, beginning with the temporary, and later permanent, cutoff of electricity to Mt. Carmel. These tactics were intensified over the next few weeks, and fell into a pattern of FBI demands followed by punitive measures. The FBI saw the situation as stalemated. They had little hope that Koresh would allow more children out. Those who were inside apparently intended to stay inside. All the while Koresh insisted that he would not exit until he received his "word from God." On March 15 the FBI formulated a "modified negotiation strategy," which urged negotiators to be firm, insist on peaceful surrender, but sharply refuse to listen any longer to what they were now calling Koresh's "Bible babble" (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 70). Although there was never any effective flow of communication between the government negotiators and David Koresh which reflected an understanding of his biblical worldview and the situation, this strategy shift effectively sealed off even the possibility of such.

"Bible Babble" Deconstructed: Making Sense of the Seven Seals

What Koresh talked about incessantly in his lengthy scriptural expositions, whether delivered to friend or foe, were the "seven seals" of the book of Revelation. Absolutely and inseparably intertwined with his view of the seven seals was an understanding of himself as the unique one, sent by God, to reveal the mystery of the seals. This was clearly Koresh's primary theme. He routinely challenged anyone, particularly Adventist ministers and preachers who might claim to speak for God or to understand the Bible, to "prove him wrong" on the seven seals, or to match him in expounding their hidden meaning. Interviews with surviving members of the Branch Davidians confirm this point. Time and time again, both publicly and privately, they report that their attachment to Koresh hinged on his understanding of the Scriptures, particularly, his unlocking of the myster-

ies of the seven seals. More than one declared, "If the Bible is true, then David is who he says he is," reducing the entire question to a matter of the veracity of the Bible itself.³ Furthermore, an examination of Koresh's beliefs suggests insights that clearly would have benefited authorities in their negotiations with the sect leader, had they not conveniently dismissed the religious discourse as "Bible-babble." Let us examine these briefly.

In chapter 5 of the book of Revelation the seven seals are introduced. The author John is taken to heaven, appearing before the Throne of God. In the right hand of God is a book or scroll, sealed with seven seals. Ancient scrolls were written on parchment or papyrus, rolled up and sealed with twine and wax. Obviously one could not read the contents without loosing the seal. This particular book is sealed seven times. The number seven, which appears often in the Bible, indicates completion or thoroughness. In other words, the contents of this book are totally and completely hidden from view. This idea of sealing up a prophetic book comes from Daniel 12:9, where the prophet is told that the words of his prophecy are "closed up and sealed till the time of the end." The contents of the book of Daniel and that of the book of Revelation are closely inter-related. Indeed, the book of Revelation is just that, a final revealing of the prophetic mysteries of the Bible, prior to the end. The question that dominates Revelation chapter 5, where the scene of the sealed book is introduced, is in verse 2: "Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?" The text says that no one, in heaven or on earth, was found worthy. The apostle John weeps at this news, but is then told, "Weep not": the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who is pictured before the Throne as a wounded Lamb, is declared worthy to open the sealed book. Traditional Christian interpreters would, of course, understand this Lamb to be none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

This is where Koresh's unique and unprecedented interpretation, based not only on the book of Revelation but on many hundreds of other prophetic passages from the Hebrew Scriptures, is significant.⁴ Koresh had demonstrated to the satisfaction of his followers, that this particular figure, this Lamb, could not be Jesus of Nazareth, the first-century Messiah. He claimed he could prove from the Bible that another "Christ" figure was pictured here. Koresh argued that the book of Revelation, although written in the first century A.D., was intended primarily for the end time. The introduction to the book says it reveals "things which must shortly come to pass," for "the time is at hand" (Rev. 1:1,3). The book concludes with Jesus Christ saying, "Surely I come quickly." He argued that such statements

would be patently false if applied to the first century. In other words, it is a book that could be understood only shortly before the end, when such statements about an imminent finale would make literal sense. As Koresh read things, Jesus Christ revealed the book in the first century, but it was not to be opened until our own time. David Koresh claimed to be the "seventh messenger" mentioned in Revelation 10:7: "But in the days of the voice of the seventh angel, when he shall begin to sound [his trumpet], the mystery of God should be finished, as he hath declared to his servants the prophets."⁵

According to Revelation 11:15 this seventh messenger appears on the scene shortly before the end, preparing the way for the return of Christ. These verses were in turn linked to Daniel 12:9, which spoke of the prophetic mysteries as "sealed" or hidden until the time of the end. As the Branch Davidians understood it, this final messenger would "open the seals" of prophetic and biblical truth. So, although Koresh did not claim to be Jesus Christ per se, he did claim to come in the power and spirit of Christ, as Jesus of Nazareth had come in his own generation, and he claimed to have received the final revelation of all the mysteries of the prophets. He often talked of this revelation he received. Prior to that time he was a gifted and diligent student and teacher of the Scriptures, but made no extraordinary claims to prophetic revelation. Like other Adventists he accepted the view that Ellen G. White, who died in 1915, was the last prophetic voice the people of God had been given. The revelation came to him dramatically and suddenly in 1985 while he was living in Israel. He describes it as a voice which began to reveal to him, through the Scriptures, all the intertwined levels of meaning contained in the entire Bible. As a high-school dropout, he often fondly quoted the passage in Isaiah: "The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him that is weary; he wakeneth morning by morning, he wakeneth mine ear to hear as the learned" (Isa. 50:4).

According to Koresh, after receiving this revelation he came to "understand it all," from Genesis through Revelation. He often said that he did not study the Bible, but that insights and understanding were given to him, day by day, poured out like a flood in his ear.⁶

Koresh as a Final Christ Figure

This claim obviously led to endless confusion. It was widely reported by virtually all the media, and certainly the FBI shared this perception, that Koresh claimed to be Jesus Christ returned to earth. However, this is a misreading of Koresh's teachings. For the record,

Koresh's view of himself is much more complex, and had been carefully worked out based on many dozens of texts in the Old and New Testaments.

The Branch Davidians were a Christian sect, with roots in the Millerite Advent movement which gave rise to the Seventh-Day Adventists and other lesser known groups (see Nichol 1944; Boyer 1992). Like all Christian churches, they clearly believed that Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ or Messiah, as well as Son of God and Savior.⁷ David Koresh placed himself within a long history of mainstream Christian theological and prophetic interpretation. He often referred to the seven stages of restoration of biblical truth since the Reformation, each of which had been heralded by a dominant reformer: Luther, John Knox, Wesley, Alexander Campbell, William Miller, Ellen G. White, and last of all, the series of truths now revealed to him and his immediate Branch Davidian predecessors.⁸ He believed that he was the seventh and final messenger, who would restore all things before the return of Christ. This seventh stage of reformation was inaugurated by Victor Houteff, who broke with the Seventh-Day Adventists in the 1930s, and involved the establishment of a literal kingdom in Palestine, prior to the second coming of Christ, thus fulfilling Isaiah 2:2-4 and 11. This kingdom would be opposed by the political powers of the world, led by the United States. According to Daniel 11:40-45 these "Babylonian" powers would invade the Middle East, and march into Jerusalem, taking control in a "peace-keeping" operation against the Israelis. The Branch Davidians expected to be living in Israel at the time and would be allied with the Jews against these Western forces. David Koresh often said that Daniel 11 was the most important prophecy in the Bible for understanding his entire prophetic role.

The confusion over Koresh's understanding of himself arises from his use of the term "Christ." Koresh knew a bit of Hebrew and Greek and had worked out an understanding of the term "christ," or "messiah," which is biblically and historically correct from a linguistic point of view, but quite understandably confusing to his general Christian audience. The word "christ," in Hebrew and in Greek, means one who is "anointed" or "chosen." It is not the proper name of Jesus, but a title or designation. The Bible uses the term "christ" or "messiah" for a variety of figures, including all of the high priests and kings of ancient Israel. Koresh claimed to be the specific "christ" mentioned in Isaiah 45:1, who is called "Cyrus" (or "Koresh," in Hebrew), and is addressed as a messiah/christ, or anointed one. This Cyrus/Koresh, ancient ruler of Persia, had conquered the Babylonian empire in the year 539 B.C. However, since the book of Revelation is

about the final defeat of a spiritual kingdom of Babylon, shortly before the end time, Koresh understood Isaiah to be talking also about a spiritual Cyrus/Koresh, who would bring it to defeat. He had studied very carefully the text through Isaiah 40–61 and found this very figure mentioned repeatedly. For example in Isaiah 46:11, God says he would call “a ravenous bird from the east, the man that executeth my counsel from a far country.” Koresh often referred to himself as this bird from the east, when he talked about his revelation in the land of Israel. In Isaiah 48:14 we read, “The LORD has loved him: he will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall be on the Chaldeans.” Koresh would ask, who is the “him,” here, who is the “arm of Yahweh” who is to destroy Babylon? The text goes on to say, “I, even I, have spoken, yea, I have called him: I have brought him, and he shall make his way prosperous . . . and now the Lord GOD, and his Spirit hath sent me.” Psalm 80:17 states “Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man whom thou madest strong for thyself.” Who is this man of God’s right hand?, Koresh would ask. He would painstakingly take his followers through these and other related sections of Scripture, repeatedly asserting that this mysterious figure could not have been Jesus of Nazareth, who fulfilled none of these prophecies. For example, he argued that the figure mentioned in Psalms 40 and 45 was a sinner like any human being, that he was married to more than one wife, that he would personally confront the “King of the North” in Daniel 11, and many other things that no Christian would claim about Jesus of Nazareth.

The Dynamics of Biblical Apocalypticism

David Koresh said on March 1, the morning after the initial BATF raid, that “we are now in the fifth seal” and that Psalm 2 was taking place, with Psalm 89 poised for potential fulfillment. What is operating here is a series of interpretive dynamics, well known to scholars of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, which have played themselves out countless times in the past 2,500 years.⁹ An understanding of these dynamics offered the most promising hope for a peaceful resolution of the Waco situation. Biblical apocalypticism involves the interplay of three basic elements: (1) The *sacred text*, which is fixed and inviolate; (2) The inspired *interpreter*, who is involved in both transmitting and effecting the meaning of the text; and (3) the fluid *context*, in which the interpreter or group finds itself. The text functions as a kind of map of things to come, setting forth an apocalyptic scenario of end-time events. Koresh’s text was of course, the entire

Bible, but particularly the books of Daniel, Revelation, Psalms, Isaiah 40–61, and the Minor Prophets. The prophetic scenario that he had worked out was highly complex, but surprisingly concrete and specific, clearly set forth in all his expositions, to both his followers and any outsiders who would listen.

Although the text itself is fixed and unchanging, mirroring in advance an almost fatalistic reflection of what must happen, there are two variables in this scheme of things, allowing for a high degree of flexibility. First, the interpreter is doing just that, interpreting, both the text and sociohistorical events. And the sociohistorical milieu—the context—is always changing and changeable. This was the key to effective negotiations during the entire fifty-one-day standoff at Mt. Carmel. The government largely controlled the context, or outside situation. Given this dynamic, *this means that the FBI actually held within its control the ability to influence Koresh's interpretation, and thus, his actions.* Unfortunately, everything the government agents did for fifty-one days, following the standard negotiation strategies and tactical maneuvers associated with Hostage Rescue Barricade situations, simply confirmed Koresh's initial perception of the confrontation on February 28—that they were “in the fifth seal,” and that Psalm 89 would likely be fulfilled. In other words, the FBI inadvertently played the part of the Babylonian forces throughout, validating in every detail, to both Koresh and his followers, this chiliastic interpretation of the standoff.

The fifth seal of the book of Revelation is chilling in its potential implications for the situation at Waco:

And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, does thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them; and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow-servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled. (Rev. 6:9–11)

The opening of the fifth seal takes place shortly prior to the cosmic judgment of God, the Great Day of the Lord's Wrath, which is to be revealed by a massive earthquake and various heavenly signs, introduced by the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12–17). It is the last major event leading up to the end. The text speaks of a group of the faithful being slain, followed by a waiting period, prior to the slaughter of the rest of the saints. Koresh linked this event with Psalm 2, which describes

a final confrontation between the "kings of the earth" and an anointed one of God. On February 28 the killing had begun. From the Branch Davidian point of view, the six who were killed died for no other reason than their intense religious devotion, defamed and branded as part of a "cult." In biblical terms, they gave their lives "for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held." The group is then told to wait for a "little season" until the rest would also be slain. Their martyrdom would lead to the sixth seal, which evokes the judgment of God on the world. As long as Koresh and his followers believed the fulfillment of this fifth seal was upon them, it appeared that the deaths of the entire community were inevitable.

The Consequences of Misinterpreting Koresh

The FBI accused Koresh of being a manipulating con man erratically making up and changing the rules as things unfolded, and they offered as evidence a pattern of broken promises. Curiously, no link was made here between Koresh's so-called erratic behavior and the FBI's psychological-warfare method of alternating gestures of coercion and conciliation. In any case, after March 2, Koresh stuck irrevocably to his position: God had told him to wait. No matter how hard the authorities pressed Koresh or his followers, demanding surrender, they were consistently given a single reply. The group refused to leave until Koresh received his "word from God." The potential horror of the impasse, since the group perceived itself to be in the fifth seal, was that they might unwittingly or even willfully orchestrate their own deaths, in order to become the final martyrs of prophecy.

It is obvious that David Koresh himself was confused by the events which had transpired. It is true that his prophetic scenario did call for a final fulfillment of this fifth seal. However, based on Daniel 11:40–12:13, which he often said was the most important prophecy for the end time, this was all supposed to happen at a later time and in another place. The setting was supposed to be in Jerusalem, in the Land of Israel, not in Waco, Texas. Also, the group was expecting the final confrontation to come in 1995, not in 1993, based on their understanding of a final ten-year period mentioned in Psalm 90. According to Koresh's understanding, he would be inevitably required, at some point in the future, as this final Koresh/Christ, to die in a battle. The latter verses of Psalm 89, which Koresh mentioned on the day of the initial BATF raid, predict just such a fate for this Davidic figure.

It was this uncertainty which offered the best hope for a peaceful

resolution of the conflict. At one point in the KRLD conversation, Koresh was asked by that station manager how he felt about the BATF agents who were wounded. He answered with emphatic passion, "My friend, it was *unnecessary*." He further stated that the whole thing was regrettable, that innocent lives had been lost, and that he would have peacefully submitted to any governmental investigation of the weapons he had purchased. This suggests that Koresh did not see the February 28 confrontation as some inevitable fulfillment of the final prophetic scenario that he had proclaimed to his followers in such detail. Too many things did not match. Nonetheless, he had been wounded, people had been killed, and he was now confronted by official agents of the United States government, whom Adventists have historically identified as representatives of the Babylon system which Christ defeats in the book of Revelation (chapters 17–18). It is clear from conversations with surviving Branch Davidians who were inside Mt. Carmel that they feared the overwhelming government forces and believed they might be slaughtered at any moment. Given these ambiguities, Koresh was not absolutely convinced that the events of February 28 had precipitated the final sequence of the book of Revelation. He was uncertain of what he was to do. So, although the text was fixed, like a script written in advance, the interpretation and the precise context were variable. Koresh was waiting for two reasons: because he understood that to be required by the fifth seal, but also because he was seeking his word from God, which would clarify for him the ambiguities and uncertainties of the situation.

Phillip Arnold and I offered our services to the FBI on March 7. As biblical scholars we had specialized in the history of apocalyptic interpretation. Our intentions were twofold. First, we offered to help interpret the rather bizarre complexities of books like Daniel and Revelation, as understood by the Branch Davidians. But even more important, we wanted to communicate with Koresh directly, offering him sympathetic and informed response to his apocalyptic interpretations. Our goal would be to build upon the ambiguity that we knew Koresh already felt about the situation. We intended to stress the point that given his interpretation of the Bible, right or wrong, one might not necessarily understand the standoff at Waco as a fulfillment of the end-time scenario. Koresh persisted in speaking only about his prophetic message with FBI negotiators. It was clear that he desperately wanted them to recognize his message and that the reason he was compelled to preach in monologue fashion was that none of the agents were equipped to discuss the many texts to which Koresh referred. There was no one to engage him in dialogue, so no

substantive discussion ever ensued. Unfortunately, Arnold and I were never allowed to communicate directly with David Koresh. Also, our expertise was enlisted only in a very peripheral way in the few conversations that Phillip Arnold had with several mid-level FBI negotiators. In early March, Arnold was interviewed over Dallas radio stations KRLD and KGBS, discussing the book of Revelation. These broadcasts attracted the attention of Koresh and Schneider. On March 16, the Davidians made a formal request that they be allowed to discuss the Bible with Phillip Arnold. The FBI denied their request, but allowed tapes of these radio programs to be sent into Mt. Carmel (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 186). Encouraged by the positive response, Arnold and I began to formulate a more carefully worked out plan to communicate with Koresh. Ron Engelman, host of a daily talk show over station KGBS, had shown sympathy toward the Branch Davidians from the day of the initial BATF raid. His program was faithfully followed by those inside Mt. Carmel on battery-powered transistor radios.¹⁰ On April 1, Arnold and I appeared on the Ron Engelman show and discussed in some detail the prophetic technicalities of the Waco situation as it might be viewed by the Branch Davidians. Although this program took the form of a dialogue between us, it was deliberately pitched for the ears of Koresh and his followers and was designed to show that someone outside was listening and capable of discussing the book of Revelation on a level the Davidians could appreciate. David Thibodeau, and other surviving Branch Davidians who were inside at the time, report that this program created a very favorable response inside.¹¹ Around this time Arnold was in contact with Dick DeGuerin, Koresh's attorney, helping him to understand the religious framework of his client. On April 4, just before Passover, the FBI allowed a tape of our radio discussion to be taken into Mt. Carmel by DeGuerin and given directly to David Koresh. This was the last face-to-face contact anyone from the outside had with those inside the facility.

On April 14, just four days before the FBI assault and resulting fire, David Koresh received his long awaited word from God. According to survivors who were inside, he had spent the prior Passover week in devout prayer and meditation, seeking a divine answer to the crisis. On Wednesday, Koresh released what turned out to be his final communication with the outside world. It was a letter addressed to DeGuerin. He reported enthusiastically that the group would come out as soon as he finished his interpretation of the seven seals and was assured of its safe delivery to Phillip Arnold and me. In part the letter read:

I am presently being permitted to document, in structured form, the decoded messages of the Seven Seals. Upon completion of this task, I will be free of my "waiting period." I hope to finish this as soon as possible and to stand before man to answer any and all questions regarding my actions. This written Revelation of the Seven Seals will not be sold, but is to be available to all who wish to know the Truth. The Four Angels of Revelation are here, now ready to punish foolish mankind; but, the writing of these Seals will cause the winds of God's wrath to be held back a little longer. I have been praying so long for this opportunity; to put the Seal in written form. Speaking the Truth seems to have very little effect on man. I was shown that as soon as I am given over into 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 want the people of this generation to be saved. I am working night and day to complete my final work of the writing out of these Seals. I thank my Father, He has finally granted me the chance to do this. It will bring New Light and hope for many and they will not have to deal with me the person.

I will demand the first manuscript of the Seals be given to you [Dick DeGuerin]. 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. We are standing on the threshold of Great Events! The Seven Seals, in written form are the most sacred information ever!

This letter offers invaluable insights into Koresh's apocalyptic theology. He spoke of receiving "permission" to write out his rendering of the seven seals. In Koresh's understanding of things, this is a central point. Indeed, as he envisioned it, the time had arrived, at long last, for the mysteries of the book of Revelation to be given to the world. In Revelation 10, an angelic figure is told to "seal up" and "write not" the mysteries of seven "thunders," which are equivalent to the events of the seven seals. Yet the figure has in his hand a "little book," and is given all the "mystery of God as declared to the prophets." He is subsequently told, "You must prophesy again before many people, nations, and tongues, and kings." Arnold and I analyzed this passage in detail in our taped discussion which was sent in to Koresh. We knew that he claimed to be this very figure in Revelation 10. We pointed out to him that although his name was now a household word—that he had been on the cover of *Time* and *Newsweek*, and was the subject of hourly CNN news reports—all the public knew about him were charges of child abuse, sexual molestation of minors, and a myriad of other bizarre practices widely report-

ed in the media. The figure in Revelation 10 possessed a "little book," which apparently contained the sealed message, yet at some point this messenger is told to go to the world at large with the message. Arnold and I pressed the point that no one outside Mt. Carmel had any idea or comprehension of his principal claim—the revelation of the seven seals. His letter clearly responded to the major points we raised with him on the tape. He described, in a concessionary tone, his intent to separate the personality ("bizarrry of me in the flesh") from the message.

What the FBI tragically failed to recognize was that according to this letter, Koresh had received his long-awaited signal. The Davidian leader clearly stated that his waiting period would end upon completion of his written manuscript. Publicly, FBI agents ridiculed this latest development as one more "delay tactic" in Koresh's attempt to prolong the agony of the siege for his own twisted purposes. The chronology in the Justice Department's report fails even to mention the letter of April 14. It merely records that "David had established a new precondition for his coming out." Unfortunately no one in the FBI's inner circles of advisors was capable of understanding the most basic elements of the religious, apocalyptic mind-set of David Koresh, or the most elementary aspects of his prophetic system.

To compound matters, the FBI asked Murray Miron of Syracuse University to examine this and four other letters sent out the previous week. Miron, a psychologist and prominent member of CAN (Cult Awareness Network), concluded that the letters bore "all the hallmarks of rampant, morbidly virulent paranoia." In point of fact, the other four letters consisted mostly of scriptural quotations related to Koresh's understanding of the situation. Had Miron any training in theology or in church history of apocalypticism, he would have recognized that those texts were a kind of code, mapping out the perspectives of the group in biblical language. Miron so dreadfully misunderstood this vital April 14 letter that he apparently thought the reference to Arnold and me was concerning book rights, casting us as literary agents attempting to cut a deal with Koresh. Miron reported his analysis of the letters to the FBI on April 15, just three days before the fire, concluding that Koresh was "a determined and hardened adversary who [had] no intention of delivering himself" (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 175). It should be obvious to those trained in religious studies that Miron lacked the expertise to judge or evaluate this type of material. Given Koresh's worldview, the April 14 letter was internally "rational" (in Weber's terms, *werrational*), reflecting a cohesive set of principles and beliefs—logic—relative to an absolute value. For fifty days David Koresh consistently stated that

he would not come out until he received his "word from God." Yet, he effectively communicated his intentions to leave to his attorneys, who had prepared the legal conditions related to a surrender.

What is doubly tragic is that apparently Attorney General Janet Reno was never told about the April 14 breakthrough, or shown the letter. The Justice Department report reveals that meetings were held in Washington all that week, prior to the Monday, April 19, assault on Mt. Carmel (U.S. Department of Justice 1993, 263–79). The FBI was pressing for permission to exercise force, and Reno was notably hesitant, asking whether there were alternatives. She repeatedly intoned, "What are arguments for waiting?" Indeed, the Justice Department report indicates that a crucial meeting was held with the attorney general on that very day, April 14, to discuss the effects of CS gas on children. However, no mention was made about the most significant development in the entire seven-week standoff. Toward the end of that week, as deliberations in Washington continued, Reno decided to proceed with the FBI's tactical plan, but then reversed herself, asking for more information. Not only did the FBI supply her with Miron's ill-informed analysis, but on April 17, just two days before the fire, officials presented her with a memorandum from Dr. Park Dietz of the UCLA School of Medicine, which also concluded that (1) Koresh was a manipulating con man, (2) further negotiations were hopeless, (3) he was not coming out, and (4) he would likely continue [*sic*] to sexually abuse the children inside. Reno was finally persuaded and gave permission for the CS gas operation. This memorandum appears to be the origin of Attorney General Reno's infamous *faux pas* regarding child abuse as a justification for the assault on April 19. Later that week the Justice Department issued a "clarification" stating that in point of fact they had no evidence of child abuse during the fifty-one-day siege.

On April 19, the day of the fire, Jeffrey Jamar, the FBI agent in charge at Waco, emphatically stated on CNN's *Larry King Show* and ABC's *Nightline* that the FBI had incontrovertible evidence, based on classified government surveillance techniques, that Koresh had not begun his manuscript on the seven seals and had no plans to do so. He was specifically questioned about the April 14 letter and Koresh's promise to surrender. He repeated that the government had hard evidence that this latest claim of Koresh was merely a further attempt to delay and manipulate the standoff. The Justice Department report, however, makes it clear that the FBI had already decided in advance to deploy the CS gas assault. In their view, Koresh was a dangerous sociopath who would respond only to force. When attorney DeGuerin told Jeffrey Jamar about the April 14 letter, Jamar was

apparently concerned about not tipping him off regarding the upcoming plan. DeGuerin was told, "We've got all the time it takes," yet Jamar was fully aware of the meetings in Washington planning the Monday assault (Maas 1994, 6).

We now know that David Koresh was hard at work on his manuscript, which he considered to be his most important life accomplishment. He worked on it as late as Sunday evening, the night before the April 19 assault, completing his exposition of the first seal. Ruth Riddle, one of the surviving Branch Davidians, served as his stenographer and typist that weekend. On the day of the fire she carried out in her jacket pocket a computer disk containing what Koresh had written up to that point. It is a substantial piece of work, running about twenty manuscript pages, quintessentially Koresh in style, content, and passion. At the end of this document we have the last recorded words of David Koresh, dictated the evening before the fire. He quotes the book of Joel and then makes the following comment:

Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that nurse at the breast; let the bridegroom go forth from his chamber, and the bride out of her closet (Joel 2:15-16). Yes, the bride is definitely to be revealed for we know that Christ is in the Heavenly Sanctuary anticipating His Marriage of which God has spoken. Should we not eagerly ourselves be ready to accept this truth and *come out of our closet and be revealed to the world* as those who love Christ in truth and in righteousness. (From the unfinished manuscript of David Koresh. Emphasis added.)

Koresh had found his text for the situation at hand; the group was to come out and be revealed to the world. This does not mean he had abandoned the overarching apocalyptic scenario, or the view of himself as the Koresh/Christ who would finally confront and defeat Babylon. It is clear, even within the manuscript itself, that he expected this to unfold at a later time.

Conclusion

It is not an unreasonable assertion to suggest that effective communication with David Koresh would have required knowledge of the biblically based, apocalyptic world he inhabited. It is equally reasonable to assert that apocalyptic sects and their leaders are not tied to a fixed agenda. The dynamics of apocalypticism allow for considerable flexibility and variation. Indeed, apocalyptic religious movements

have a long, rich history dating back over two millennia with varying degrees of tension with or accommodation to surrounding cultures. Yet to the FBI in 1993, the outcome of the Waco standoff was inevitable, predetermined by Koresh's beliefs, engendering a rigid, inflexible, and military posturing in the conflict. Koresh was reduced to a stereotype, a tabloid persona bent on self-destruction. To a few selected psychiatrists, he was psychopathic, suffering from delusional paranoia. Such perceptions, whether valid or not, certainly obscured the most constructive means of dealing with Koresh and his followers. (Indeed, what insights or advantages were gained by these secondhand psychiatric profiles?) Although the FBI charged that Koresh was erratic, contradicting himself and breaking promises at will, the Justice Department's highly detailed log of events reveals otherwise. The indelible impression one gets in reviewing these documents is how utterly consistent both Koresh and his followers were from March 2 to April 19. They had been told to wait by God, and no amount of pressure or abuse would divert them from their path. The final and insufferable tragedy is that when Koresh finally received his "word" on April 14, the decision to launch a second assault by authorities in Washington was made without the informed advice of professionally trained scholars in religion, who were either excluded or ignored, and who most likely could have helped them avert the deaths of seventy-four men, women, and children.

Notes

1. Koresh had spoken over CNN with anchorman David French at 7:25 p.m. on Sunday, the day of the raid. He subsequently called in and spoke with KRLD at 10:05 p.m. for about twenty minutes and then again at 1:50 a.m. for about twenty-five minutes.

2. The followers of David Koresh do not actually call themselves Branch Davidians, but merely "Bible students" or "students of the Seven Seals." It appears that at least for some of the newer converts, there were only loose ties with this tradition (see Bromley and Silver, this volume); and most had come to study with David Koresh. In this chapter I use the term "Branch Davidians" for convenience, with this explanation in mind.

3. This was consistently reported to me in interviews with some of the more articulate members of the group. It is also confirmed by tapes in my possession, most of them made in 1987, in which Koresh is teaching his doctrines to initiates. One can clearly see from these tapes that Koresh's power of persuasion rested upon his ability to clarify and explain the Bible in the greatest detail, particularly the mysteries of books of Haggai, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zechariah, Isaiah, and of course, the book of Revelation.

4. My exposition of Koresh's teachings is based primarily on three sources: tapes made in the late 1980s of his detailed Bible studies with his students, interviews with surviving Branch Davidians who studied under him, and Koresh's own expositions in his manuscript on the Seven Seals, which survived the fire on computer disc.

5. "Angel" in Greek, the word *angelos*, means "messenger," and is often used in the Bible for a human being, not necessarily a celestial being.

6. Branch Davidians described Koresh as not really "studying" the Bible, as one generally understands the term. In other words, he did not constantly pore over the text, with commentary and concordance, trying to figure out this or that point or doctrine. They also said he did not read much, or study other materials. They saw him rather as one who simply opened the Bible and expounded this or that insight, as it would come to him. They had an impression that he simply "knew things," without study. He often made fun of those who "wasted thousands of dollars" on biblical studies in college, and yet could not tell you the first thing about the complexities of the prophetic texts he expounded. It was this knowledge of the scriptures which riveted Koresh's followers to him. They tended to come from biblically oriented backgrounds in which the veracity of the Bible was an inviolate assumption. Accordingly, when Koresh showed them "what the Bible truly meant" they felt they had little choice but to follow. The surviving tapes of Koresh teaching his students in private sessions, some of which cover every verse in Isaiah 40-61, a most complex and difficult section of the Bible, demonstrate his amazing ability.

7. Sometimes Koresh would say he did not believe in "Jesus," meaning the paganized figure of apostate Christianity, whom he would distinguish from the historical "Yeshua," the Nazarene. The perspective is common among the more radical reformers and restorationists.

8. According to this belief, each figure is associated with a key step or insight that brought the people of God closer to the original, primitive truth of the early Church: Luther (faith), Knox (spirit), Wesley (grace), Campbell (baptism), Miller (second coming), White (sabbath), Houteff (Davidic kingdom on earth), Ben Roden (Jewish feast days), Lois Roden (feminine nature of God).

9. I am using "apocalypticism" here to refer to the view that the end of time is imminent, with signs of the end unfolding according to an interpretive scenario revealed in the prophetic texts of Scripture.

10. At one point, early in March, Engelman asked the Branch Davidians to move their satellite dish to a specific position if they were listening. They responded a few minutes later. Also, David Thibodeau, one of those who survived the fire, reports that Engelman's show was avidly followed by the group each day.

11. I conducted these interviews on November 15, 1993, in Washington, DC.

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