

From the Ashes

Making Sense of Waco

James R. Lewis, Editor

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Chapter 4

The Waco Tragedy: An Autobiographical Account of One Attempt to Avert Disaster

James D. Tabor

It was 7:25 p.m. on Sunday, February 28, 1993. My attention was suddenly riveted to an unfamiliar voice, edged with an appealing intensity, coming over CNN on the television in the next room. Anchorman David French had someone on a phone hookup who was quoting biblical passages in a steady stream. A photo of a young man with glasses and long wavy hair, which was later to become familiar around the world, was on the TV screen against a backdrop of a map of Texas with a place marked as "Mt. Carmel," near Waco. Regular CNN programming had been interrupted. It was obvious that some emergency situation was unfolding. I had not yet heard of the Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Bureau raid on Mt. Carmel that very morning at 9:55 a.m. which resulted in a two-hour gun battle with the Branch Davidians, the religious group which lived there, leaving four AFT agents dead and fifteen wounded. For the moment my attention was drawn to two things which fascinated me. The young man from Texas called himself David Koresh, and he was talking about the "seven seals" of the Book of Revelation. As a biblical scholar I knew that Koresh was the Hebrew word for Cyrus, the ancient Persian king who destroyed the

Babylonian empire in 539 B.C.E. I was intrigued that anyone would have such a last name. Also, I was quite familiar with the mysterious seven seals in the last book of the Bible, and how they unfolded in an apocalyptic sequence leading to the Judgment Day and the "end of the world." Like any good newsperson, CNN anchorman French kept trying to get David Koresh to talk about the morning raid, how many had been killed or wounded from his group, and whether he planned to surrender. Koresh admitted he was wounded badly, that his two-year-old daughter had been killed, and some others were killed and wounded from his group. But it was clear that he mainly wanted to quote scriptures, mostly from the Book of Revelation. He said he was the Lamb, chosen to open the Seven Seals. He challenged religious leaders and Biblical scholars from around the world to come to Texas and engage in debate with him on the Bible, and particularly to try and match his understanding in unlocking the mystery of the Seven Seals.

The phone conversation over CNN went on for about forty-five minutes. I was utterly taken with this whole scene. Here we were in the year 1993 and this young Cyrus, would-be challenger of modern Babylon, was actually delving into the details of the Book of Revelation at prime time, over a worldwide television network. I pulled out a Bible and turned to Isaiah 45, where I recalled the ancient Persian king Cyrus was addressed by God Himself:

* { Thus says the LORD to his *anointed*, to Cyrus [Koresh],
 whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him
 and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him.

Here Cyrus is actually called "messiah," that is, one who is anointed. The Greek translation of this Hebrew word, *mashiach*, is "Christos," from which we get our term "Christ." So, one could accurately say that this ancient Persian king was called Christ. David Koresh also claimed 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. It was widely but incorrectly reported, even by the most responsible media, that David Koresh claimed to be Jesus Christ, or even God Himself. This confusion resulted from a lack of understanding of the biblical use of the term "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 Ps. 133). In other words, in this general sense of the term the Bible speaks of many "christs" or messiahs, not one. The word comes to refer to one who is especially selected by God for a mission, as was the Persian king Cyrus.

It was in this sense that David Koresh took the label "Christ" or messiah. He believed he was the chosen one who was to open the seven seals of the Book of Revelation and bring on the downfall of "Babylon." The early Christians were quite fond of the same kind of coded language. They routinely referred to the Roman empire as "Babylon." The letter of 1 Peter closes with such a reference: "She who is at Babylon [i.e., Rome], who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings" (1 Pet. 5:13). The Book of Revelation is essentially a cryptic account of the destruction of "Babylon," which was understood to be Rome (Rev. 19). (I was later to learn that the children of the Branch Davidians routinely referred to the FBI and any other "outsiders," as Babylonians.)

Over the next few days, as the FBI took over control of the siege of the Mt. Carmel complex, it became clear to me that neither the officials in charge, nor the media who were sensationally reporting the sexual escapades of David Koresh, had a clue about the *biblical* world which this group inhabited. Their entire frame of reference came from the Bible, especially from the Book of Revelation and the ancient Hebrew prophets. I realized that in order to deal with David Koresh, and to have any chance for a peaceful resolution of the Waco situation, one would have to understand and make use of these biblical texts. In other words, one would need to enter into the apocalyptic world of David Koresh and his dedicated followers. It was obvious that they were willing to die for what they believed, and they would not surrender under threat of force. I decided to contact the FBI and offer my services.

I called my friend Phillip Arnold, director of Reunion Institute in Houston, Texas. Dr. Arnold, like me, is a specialist in biblical studies and we share a special interest in both ancient and modern forms of *apocalypticism*. The term comes from the Greek word *apocalypsis*, which means "to uncover, to reveal." The Book of Revelation is often called the *Apocalypse*. An apocalyptic group is one which 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 are properly understood as an apocalyptic movement within ancient Judaism, as was the group which produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Since the third century B.C.E. many such groups, first Jewish and later Christian, have proclaimed the imminent end of the world on the basis of their understanding of biblical prophetic texts. Dr. Arnold agreed with me that it was urgent and vital that someone who understood the biblical texts become involved in the situation.

The first FBI agent Dr. Arnold contacted in Waco admitted that they were hopelessly confused when David Koresh went into one of his lengthy expositions of scripture, which occurred regularly in their daily telephone negotiations. In later interviews with survivors of the Waco tragedy the one point that they made repeatedly and consistently was that the source of their

attraction to David Koresh was his knowledge of the scriptures, particularly the Book of Revelation. The FBI does not routinely pack Bibles when facing what they had categorized as a hostage situation. This FBI agent told us how they had been frantically reading through the Book of Revelation in the Gideon Bibles in their hotel rooms. This 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. He asked, "What is this about the seven seals?" We began to explain to him this reference to a mysterious scroll mentioned in the Book of Revelation, which was sealed with wax stamps, and could only be opened by a figure variously referred to as the Lamb, the anointed one (i.e., Christ), or the "Branch of David." David Koresh claimed to be this person, sent to the world before the end of the age and empowered to finally open this scroll. He interpreted the seven seals of the Book of Revelation by the use of certain key chapters from the Psalms, which he took to be the enigmatic "key of David" mentioned in Revelation 3:7. Psalms 40 and 45 were especially important to his self-understanding and Koresh connected these to the meaning of the first seal—the rider on the white horse who goes forth with a bow to conquer. He understood himself to be that rider, a so-called "sinful messiah" who was written of in a scroll:

Then I said, "Here I am; *in the scroll of the book it is written of me*. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart. . . . For evils have encompassed me without number; *my iniquities have overtaken me, until I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head*, and my heart fails me. (Ps. 40:7-8, 12)

Psalms forty five, which he understood to refer to the same figure, namely himself, speaks of a mighty king, anointed by Yahweh, who rides victoriously, marrying princesses and bearing many sons who will rule the earth (v. 4-7, 10-16). This psalm explains why Koresh felt he was supposed to father children with the former wives of his male followers. He was the Branch of David who was to build up a dynasty which would someday rule the world from Jerusalem (Jer. 23:3-5). Koresh argued that these and many other passages, which were applied to Jesus Christ by mainstream Christianity, simply could not refer to him. Jesus was said to be without sin, he never married and bore children, and the Branch of David is to be raised up only at the end time, when the Jewish people return to the Land. Koresh insisted that if the scriptures be true, a latter-day messiah must appear, fulfilling the details of these prophecies.

Over the next few weeks Dr. Arnold and I spent many hours in technical and lengthy discussions with Livingston Fagan, an articulate member of the Branch Davidians who had been sent out of the compound by David Koresh

as a spokesperson and was being held in jail. With our knowledge of the prophetic texts of the Bible, and especially the Book of Revelation, we slowly began to attain some understanding of David Koresh's interpretation.

It became obvious to us that the Branch Davidian group understood itself to be actually living through the events of the seven seals, found primarily in chapter six of the Book of Revelation. We became persuaded that they understood themselves to be "in the fifth seal." The text reads:

When he 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 testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, *how long will it be* before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" They were each given a white robe and told to wait *a little season*, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers who were *soon to be killed* as they themselves had been killed. (Rev. 6:9-11)

We discussed the chilling implications of these verses with the FBI. For the Koresh group the Book of Revelation was like a script, setting forth in vivid detail what would transpire, and instructing them as to what they should do. The reason they refused to come out of their compound was that they felt God was telling them in these verses to wait "a little season." But the verse goes on to predict that they, like the others in the February 28 ATF raid, would then be killed. David Koresh once told the federal agents, "I knew you were coming before you knew you were coming." On the morning of that initial raid David had said to ATF undercover agent Robert Rodriguez, who was spying on the group, "What thou doest, do quickly" (John 13:27). David had been studying the Bible with agent Rodriguez for weeks, even though he had figured out he was working for the ATF, and now considered him a Judas figure, who had been given an opportunity to know the truth but rejected it. 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. What worried us all was the very real possibility of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the Koresh group found itself living "in the fifth seal," did that mean it was inevitable that the remaining eighty-seven men, women, and children in the Mt. Carmel compound must also die? Might they not provoke a violent end to things 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? We were fascinated by the way in which the literal words of this text dominated the entire situation. David Koresh insisted to the FBI that God had told him to "wait" an unspecified time, and the FBI constantly pushed him,

asking, "How long?" The entire drama was being played out according to a biblical script.

Through hours of conversations with one another, and consultation with Livingston Fagan, we slowly began to map out the apocalyptic scenario or "script" that David Koresh and his followers were expecting. We were absolutely convinced that David would never surrender from pressure or harassment. Given his understanding of himself as the messenger, or "anointed one," who had been given the secret of the seven seals, he would only act as he felt God was leading him. And the text of the Book of Revelation was his primary guide. According to his reading of the seven seals, five had now been fulfilled and God was telling him to wait. Given such a view, he simply would not come out and surrender as the FBI demanded. To Koresh and his followers such a move, before the proper time, would have been inconceivable. They would have seen it as disobedience to God. Slowly we formulated a plan to approach David Koresh with an alternative scenario, seeking to meet him within his own interpretive world.

Our first step was a radio broadcast over KGBS, the Dallas radio station which Koresh and his followers tuned to each morning on their battery operated transistor radios. It was April 1, thirty three days since the siege had begun. The talk show host, Ron Engelman, who had been critical of the federal authorities since the February 28 ATF raid, allowed us full use of air time to begin a dialogue with Koresh. Dick DeGuerin, Koresh's attorney who had been meeting with him for the past four days, was clued into our plan. He assured us that Koresh and his followers would be listening to our discussion. What we presented in give-and-take dialogue form, was a rather technical discussion of an alternative interpretation of the Book of Revelation, which we thought David Koresh might accept. As academics, we were not presenting this interpretation as our own personal view. Rather, our approach was hypothetical—given Koresh's general world view, and the interpretation he was following of the seven seals, what about an alternative understanding? Three days later, on Sunday, April 4th, Dick DeGuerin also took a cassette tape we had made of our discussion of the Book of Revelation into the Mt. Carmel compound so that David Koresh and his followers would have it to listen to and study. Passover was approaching, an eight-day holiday which the Branch Davidians observed. Koresh had announced that following the Passover festival he would announce his plan for surrender.

On Wednesday, April 14th, just five days before the fire that consumed the compound, David Koresh released a letter through his lawyer. It was to be his last. He said that at long last his wait was over; that he had been instructed by God to write an exposition expounding the secrets of the seven seals of Revelation. He wrote:

I am presently being permitted 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.... I have been praying for so long for this opportunity to put the Seals in written form. Speaking the truth seems to have very little effect on man. 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 want the people of this generation to be saved. 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. It will bring new light and hope for many and they won't have to deal with me the person. 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.

Dr. Arnold and I were elated. We felt we had been successful at last. In our tapes to David Koresh we had argued this very point. We had tried to convince him that he was not necessarily "in the fifth seal" of Revelation chapter six, which would mandate the death of the group. We also argued that the "little season" mentioned in Revelation 6:11 could be an extended period. It was logically correlated with the "delay" of Revelation 7:1-3, which we maintained, given such a literal interpretation, could last several years. Further, on the basis of chapter ten we had stressed the idea of a message written in a "little book" which would be given to the world (Rev. 10:11). We had pointed out to David Koresh that although he had appeared on the covers of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *People* magazines all in the same week, and was being mentioned hourly on CNN and daily on the network news reports, no one remotely had a clue as to his message. We told him that most people had the idea that he was an insane sex pervert who molested children and claimed to be Jesus Christ, or even God. He had apparently accepted our arguments. We, along with the attorneys, were absolutely convinced he would come out and that this writing of the seven seals, in his mind, was the answer from God he had been talking about for the past six weeks. This has to do with the dynamics of apocalypticism. It always operates through a complex play between the fixed text or "script," the shifting circumstances of outside events, and the imaginative casting of the interpreter. We had not been trying to manipulate David, but we did honestly feel that given his literalist view of the text, there were other viable alternatives.

The FBI had a different reaction. Following Passover week they stepped up their pressure tactics, demanding once and for all that Koresh and his people surrender. They took this latest move on David's part as one more in a long series of delay tactics. In their daily press briefings over the next

few days they belittled Koresh as a grade school drop-out who would hardly be capable of writing a book. They said he was a manipulating madman who thought he was God, who interpreted the Bible through the barrel of a gun. He was mockingly pictured as the cartoon character Lucy, who always "moves the football" at the last moment. Nonetheless they did allow writing supplies to be delivered to the Mt. Carmel compound on Sunday evening, April 18, the very evening before the tear gas assault. The authorities had clearly lost all patience. At 5:50 a.m., Monday morning they called the compound and informed the group that if they did not surrender the place would be gassed. What took place in the Mt. Carmel compound from that point on is uncertain. One survivor of the fire with whom I talked told me that the last time he saw David Koresh was about five 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.

When the FBI began their tear gas assault that Monday morning David must have been profoundly disappointed and confused. He had become convinced that God not only was going to graciously allow him to write this most important explanation of the seven seals for the world, but that this was part of the apocalyptic script. In a split second, as the buildings shook, the walls were punched with holes, and the tear gas was injected, he must have thought to himself, "Well, I guess I was right all along. We are in the fifth seal after all, and we must die like the others." It is obvious that one does not write a manuscript if the walls of one's home are being broken down. The actions of the FBI forced David to revise his apocalyptic understanding. Any fulfillment of Revelation 10:11, which he had become convinced would now take place, became impossible. There was not a chance in the world that he or his followers would "come out and surrender to proper authority" as the FBI loudspeakers urged them that morning. To them 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 which would lead to the final collapse of the enemy and the coming of Jesus Christ. Like the famous biblical scene at ancient Mt. Carmel, the contest between the forces of good and evil is decided by a burnt offering (1 Kings 18). For Koresh's followers, the fifth seal has been fulfilled and all that remains is the sudden revelation of the "Great Day of God's Wrath," associated with the sixth seal (Rev. 6:12-17). Modern Babylon has been weighed in the balance and found wanting; her final collapse is imminent.

There is a final bit of historical irony in the Waco tragedy. The defenders of Masada had also died at precisely the same time of year, a few days after Passover in the year 73 C.E. after a lengthy siege by the Roman military forces. Like David Koresh they were serious students of the

prophecies of Daniel, the text upon which the Book of Revelation is mainly based. Daniel 11:33 says that in the final battle the remnant of God's true people would die "by sword and by flame." David knew about Masada. He also said he was familiar with the newly released Dead Sea scrolls and had been following the debates surrounding them. It is worth noting that one of the most disputed texts, by one possible translation, speaks of a "Branch of David" being wounded and killed by the authorities. David Koresh, born Vernon Howell, like the Jesus he claimed to emulate, died at age thirty-three, around the time of Passover.

There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that David Koresh would have surrendered peacefully when he finished his manuscript. After the fire some federal agents said they doubted that he was even working on such a project. They took David's talk about being allowed by God to finally write the interpretation of the seven seals as a ploy to further delay things. We now know this was not the case. Ruth Riddle, one of the survivors of the fire, had a computer disk in the right pocket of her jacket. She had been typing David's hand-written manuscript the day before the fire. On that disk was his exposition of the first seal. The disk is in the possession of the federal authorities.

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