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Patterns of the End: Textual Weaving from Qumran to Waco

*For surely Yahweh does nothing without  
revealing his secret to his servants the Prophets.*

– Amos 3:7

In this paper I focus in particular on the apocalyptic messianic views of the Branch Davidian community and that of their leader David Koresh, who tragically came to international attention in the Spring of 1993. Since my training and work is that of an historian of the Mediterranean religions of late antiquity, I am stepping far out of my chronological period. Most of my research has been on late 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Jewish apocalyptic systems of thought, particularly those of the Qumran community and the followers of John the Baptist and Jesus. Nonetheless, since I was directly involved in assisting the FBI negotiators during the Waco crisis, and I have subsequently studied the apocalyptic teachings of David Koresh in the light of the systems I know from late antiquity, I trust that these reflections and analysis will prove fruitful for our collective deliberations on Messianism.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the paper I call attention to some of the major thematic parallels between the apocalyptic belief system of the Branch Davidians and that of the Qumran community, as reflected in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Both groups located their history and experiences in the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible, understood their community as the elect and chosen saints living at the “appointed time of the end,” and were led by a “Teacher” who claimed a definitive and ultimate role as God’s final revelatory messenger. My aim is to isolate some of the main elements in a common

process of interpreting texts that I describe as the “dynamics of biblical apocalypticism.”<sup>2</sup> That the two communities, and their respective Teachers, dealt with and appropriated some of the same texts in strikingly similar ways, yet are separated by two millennia, is a testimony to the enduring power of such textual dynamics in the life of apocalyptic movements of this genre.

<sup>1</sup> See my account of the whole episode in the work I co-authored with Eugene Gallagher, *Why Waco: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> I use the term apocalypticism in a restricted way here to refer to the view that the end of time is imminent, with the signs of the End unfolding according to an interpretive scenario revealed in the prophetic texts of Scripture.

By any scholarly reckoning Daniel 11:20-28, which purports to be a prophetic vision of the events that will usher in the “end of the age,” concerns the early military campaigns of the Syrian ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175-164 B.C.E.) into Palestine and Egypt. Here, in thinly veiled language, the author covers Antiochus’ deposing of the pro-Egyptian high-priest Onias III in favor of his Hellenizing brother Jason, his partially successful march against Egypt, and his subsequent plunder of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem (see 1 Macc 1:10-19; 2 Macc 4:7-17). That the “contemptible person” of Daniel’s vision, whom he also knows as the “king of the North” (11:21, 40), is none other than the “sinful root” whom the author of 1 Maccabees identifies as Aniochus IV, is not in dispute (1 Macc 1:10). The problem is, the events that the author of Daniel subsequently describes, and obviously expects to take place at the “time of the end,” culminating in a cosmic judgment and resurrection of the dead, simply never happened—

neither in the career of Antiochus, nor that of any other potential candidate for “king of the North” down to our time (11:40-12:4).

The prophetic scenario set forth in this vision of Daniel 11-12 is surely the most detailed found in the Hebrew Bible, echoing the specifics of Antiochus’ political, military, and cultural activities in the region. One might think, for this very reason, that the text would have fallen into disfavor or at least disuse, in view of its blatant “failure” in the capricious light of historical events. But such has not been the case. Although it may be true that a more general sketch of “end-time” events (e.g., the proverbial wars, famines, earthquakes, pestilence, and persecution) appears to escape the possibility of historical falsification, and thus offers itself to every generation anew, it is also true that such stylized apocalyptic scenarios lack the gripping imaginative potential of a text like Daniel 11-12.<sup>3</sup> The detailed visionary materials one finds in Daniel, particularly in chapters 7, 8, 9, and 11-12, sets it apart from most other apocalyptic/prophetic texts in the Hebrew Bible precisely because of its highly specific references to geographical setting, chronology, actors, and events. Here one reads of mysterious composite “beasts” with multiple heads and horns, representing successive kingdoms and rulers. One finds tightly linked chronological patterns such as the Seventy “Weeks” of years (490) and the successive periods of 1260, 1290, 1335 and 2300 (or 1150) days. Details of battles set in precise geographical contexts are carefully described. All of these elements are related to what the text repeatedly calls “the appointed time of the end.” When understood on its own terms, according to its own internal claims, as an inspired, and thus an inviolate, revelation of end-time events, Daniel becomes a text that simply can not be wrong. Like some type of prophetic “template,” devout interpreters have applied it countless times

over the past two millennia to some anticipated unfolding of historical events, always looking for an “Antiochus-like” candidate who will fulfill things to the letter. The apostle Paul, writing in the mid-50s C.E., but echoing the precise language of the prophecies of Daniel, had recommended celibacy to his communities, warning them that “the appointed time had grown very short” (1 Cor 7:29). The followers of the apostle Paul in the late 60s C.E., judging from 2 Thessalonians 2:1-11 (and likely Paul himself a decade earlier), anticipated a repeat of Caligula’s aborted attempt to set his own statue in the Temple at Jerusalem, perhaps by the emperor Nero, thus fulfilling Daniel 11:31-36:

<sup>3</sup> An example of such a generalized text is Isaiah 24. Such texts are highly elastic, lacking specific references to actors, events, time, or place. The “four horsemen” of John’s Apocalypse appear to reflect the same stylized scenario. The Synoptic “Apocalypse” of Mark 13 is most instructive in this regard in that it actually combines the general (vv. 3-13) with the highly specific, drawn from Daniel (vv. 14-23).

*Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the continual burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate . . . And the king shall do according to his will; he shall exalt himself and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak astonishing things against the God of gods. He shall prosper till the indignation is accomplished; for what is determined shall be done.*

The early followers of Jesus interpreted the first Jewish-Roman Revolt in the light of the same texts. Indeed “*the sign*” of the End was to be the dreaded “desolating sacrilege” set up by the “king of the North” in the holy place of the Herodian Temple:

*But when you see the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be [Matthew's gloss: "spoken of by Daniel the prophet," 24:15], then let those who are in Judea flee to*

*the mountains . . . for in those days there will be such tribulation as has not been from the beginning of the creation which God created until now, and never will be” (Mark 13:14, 19).*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *This text is a pesher on Daniel 11:31-12:1. The flight to the “mountains,” was understood to be the trans-Jordan area of the Decapolis, designated in Dan 11:41 as an area of safety (“main portion of the Ammonites”) that would escape the invasion of the evil “King of the North.”*

This imminent apocalyptic expectation of Mark, which was repeated in a relatively intact form by Matthew (chapter 24) a decade or so later (80s C.E.), is recast by Luke into a decidedly non-apocalyptic form. Rather than the expected “desolating sacrilege” leading to the final events of the End, Luke interprets the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 70 C.E., as well as the further dispersion of the Jewish people from Palestine, as the signs of a new dispensation that he views most positively, namely—the “times of the Gentiles” in which the Gospel of “repentance and forgiveness of sins” would be proclaimed to all nations (Luke 21:20-24; 24:47). Following the disaster of the second Jewish Revolt (132-135 C.E.), and Hadrian’s rebuilding of Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina, the hopes and expectations that had been fueled for more than two centuries by these prophecies in Daniel largely waned.<sup>5</sup> After all, with neither Jewish Temple nor Judean State, the land of Palestine could hardly serve as an arena for the literal fulfillment of texts such as Daniel 11:29-39. In this regard the words of the post-Exilic prophet Habakkuk offered a perennial comfort to both Jews and Christians:

<sup>5</sup> See the primary sources cited in F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 107-130. The book of Daniel was denied a place among the

Hebrew Prophets and relegated to the third section of the canon, that of the Writings (Ketuvim), while the book of Revelation came near to being excluded from the New Testament corpus entirely.

*For still the vision awaits its time; it hastens to the End—it will not lie. If it seem slow, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Behold, he whose soul is not upright in him shall fail, but the righteous shall live by his faith (2:3-4).<sup>6</sup>*

<sup>6</sup> *This text was cited by the Qumran community as a way of dealing with the apparent failure or delay of their own prophetic schemes to develop (1QpHab 7:1-8). It is used by the writer of Hebrews much to the same end (10:37-39).*

The apocalyptic systems that we can subsequently trace, particularly among Christians, found it necessary to develop more allegorical and symbolic ways of reading texts such as Daniel and Revelation.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See the various movements surveyed by Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium, Revised and expanded edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), and the texts compiled by Bernard McGinn, *Visions of the End* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981). Jews had a greater tendency to continue to read the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible rather literally, but for another time, perhaps in the distant future. Thus when the emperor Julian (361-363 C.E.) offered a possibility for a return to Zion and a rebuilding of the Temple, concrete plans were made, funds were raised, and old prophetic passions were certainly reawakened, see Peters, *Jerusalem*, pp. 145-147. However, the Jewish apocalyptic texts from the Medieval period, collected by Raphael Patai, tend to move in the direction of the allegorical and the increasingly fantastic, see his *The Messiah Texts: Jewish Legends for Three Thousand Years* (Detroit: Wayne

State University, 1979). It is worth noting that the 17th century Jewish Messiah Shabbatai Zevi, and his prophet Nathan, did take quite literally the notion that the Davidic Messiah must facilitate the return of the “lost tribes” of Israel (based on Isa 11). They sent delegates to the east to contact these legendary apocalyptic players and rumors of their imminent arrival in Palestine helped fuel the messianic hysteria that swept the Ottoman empire and the Jewish communities of central Europe (see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbetai Sevi* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1931) .

It was only in this century, with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, and more particularly, the Israeli capture of the Old City of Jerusalem in 1967, that prophetic hopes that had been dormant since 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple times were revived.<sup>8</sup> This was certainly the case in the latter months of 1990 when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded the tiny Gulf state of Kuwait, resulting in the massive military response by the United States, Europe, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and their allies.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), has done a masterful job of tracing the rising interest in prophecy among evangelical Christians after 1948 and 1967.

<sup>9</sup> See the popular news article by Jeffery Sheler, “A Revelation in the Middle East,” *U.S. News and World Report*, November 19, 1990, pp. 67-68. Not only were leading evangelical Christians speculating as to the “prophetic significance” of the Gulf War but Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, leader of the Orthodox sect known as Lubavitchers, declared it the definitive beginning of a series of events that would lead to

messianic times. On the underrated influence of “prophecy belief” in American culture in general see Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*.

David Koresh was one such interpreter who had his attention fixed on these events in the Middle East. He was the 30 year old “prophet” of the tiny Branch Davidian sect that had broken with the Seventh Day Adventist Church back in the 1940s and lived communally outside Waco, Texas in a settlement they called Mt. Carmel. The group anticipated the imminent and literal fulfillment of biblical prophecies, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth, beginning in Jerusalem. Koresh had often told his followers that Daniel 11 was the most important prophecy in the Bible.<sup>10</sup> He understood it to be the “master key” to the entire biblical prophetic corpus. For Koresh, as well as many other evangelical interpreters of biblical prophecy at the time, the close match between the latter part of Daniel 11 and events in the Gulf was all too obvious:

<sup>10</sup> The views of David Koresh largely survive on audio tapes made prior to his death in April, 1993. I have documented his overall spiritual and prophetic outlook in *Why Waco?*, pp. 23-79.

[There] shall arise a contemptible person to whom royal majesty has not been given

(v.21a)<sup>11</sup> *Interpretation: The ruthless Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein whose cruelty had become proverbial in the Western media.*

<sup>11</sup> *Biblical quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, although when I deal closely with Koresh’s exegesis of the biblical text I use the King James Version, which was the only translation he endorsed.*

He shall come in without warning and obtain the kingdom by flatteries . . . he shall act deceitfully; and he shall become strong with a small people (v. 21b-23) *Interpretation:*

*Saddam Hussein obtained power by a coup that put his tiny Bath party in control and installed him as absolute ruler in Iraq. He declared his reign a rebirth of the glory of the ancient empire of Babylon, with himself as a new Nebuchadnezzar, ancient destroyer of Jerusalem and the Kingdom of Judah.*

Without warning he shall come into the richest parts [or among the richest men] of the province . . . scattering among them plunder, spoil, and goods (v. 24) *Interpretation: The invasion of oil-rich Kuwait by Iraq with the resulting plunder and destruction.*

And he shall stir up his power and his courage against the king of the south with a great army (v. 25) *Interpretation: Iraq threatens both Saudi Arabia and Egypt to the south, massing forces on the desert border for an invasion.*

And the king of the south shall wage war with an exceedingly great and mighty army (v. 25) *Interpretation: The massive response of the United States and its allies, led by Egypt and Saudi Arabia.*

His army shall be swept away, and many shall fall down slain (v. 26) *Interpretation: Utter defeat of the Iraqi army by the Allies with massive casualties inflicted.*

And as for the two kings, their minds shall be bent on mischief; they shall speak lies at the same table, but to no avail; for the end is yet to be at the time appointed (v.

27) *Interpretation: Sudden halt to the Allied invasion of Iraq, General Schwartzkopf ordered to pull back all forces; a fragile peace agreement is signed.*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> *Menachem Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe was quick to point out that Gen. Schwartzkopf was strangely ordered to halt abruptly the Allied advance on Thursday, February 28, 1991, the very evening of Purim, as synagogues around the world were celebrating the defeat of Haman, ancient foe of the Jewish people. The Kabbalists were*

*also quick to point out that the Gematria (mystical numerical value) of Saddam Hussein's name in Hebrew equaled 240, the same number as that of Amalek, the ruthless enemy of Israel from the time of Moses. Indeed, the synagogue readings for Purim focus on Exodus 17: 8-16 where Yahweh declares that the forces of Amalek, though battling against God's people from generation to generation, will be utterly blotted out in the end.*

And he shall return to his land with great substance, but his heart shall be set against the holy covenant (v. 28). *Interpretation: Saddam, who had vowed "to turn Tel Aviv into a crematorium," and even fired Scud missiles into Israel, formally withdraws but blames global "Zionist" forces for his defeat, vowing revenge.*

The key phrase in this entire section of Daniel 11 is found in verse 27: *for the end is yet to be at the time appointed*. The phrase "at the time appointed" occurs again in verses 29 and 35, while verses 35 and verse 40 speak of a series of events designated as the "time of the end."<sup>13</sup> Koresh was convinced that the Gulf War marked the "beginning of the end," but that Saddam had been Providentially spared in order that he (or a similar successor) might fulfill the next phase of this prophetic scenario described in verses 29-45—the actual invasion and near defeat of Israel by this wicked "king of the North," the leader of modern "Babylon."

<sup>13</sup> This notion of a "set time," ordained by Yahweh for his intervention and final judgment is common in Israel's post-exilic literature (Psa 75:2; 102:13; Isa 60:22b; Hab 2:3-4; *1 Enoch* 10:12; *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* 17; *Jubilees* 22:8-21; *Testament of Moses* 7-8).

On Sunday morning, February 28, 1993, two years *to the very day* after the defeat of Saddam Hussein, as if prompted by some cosmic cue, the Federal Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms carried out their ill-fated raid on Mt. Carmel, the communal center of the Branch Davidians a few miles outside Waco, Texas. Thus began a 51 day siege that ended in the incineration of the 74 inhabitants that had remained inside throughout this period. David Koresh spoke about being “in the fifth Seal” the very day of the BATF raid. He was referring to his particular understanding of a sequence of events to unfold before the End, drawn primarily from the Seven-Sealed scroll of Revelation 6, but connected to a host of related texts throughout the Bible. What is operating here is a series of interpretive dynamics, well known to scholars of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, that have played themselves out countless times in the past 2500 years. An understanding of these dynamics would have provided what appears to have been the best 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/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, the Psalms, Isaiah chapters 40-61, and the Minor Prophets, which he had woven into a prophetic complex that had deeply impressed his followers and convinced them that he was a prophet himself. 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 the outside *Context*. And second, outside events are always changing and changeable. This was the key to effective negotiations during the entire 51 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 in his interpretations, and thus in his actions. Unfortunately, *everything* they did for 51 days, following the standard negotiation strategies and tactical quasi-military maneuvers developed in response to what they called “Hostage Rescue Barricade” situations, simply confirmed Koresh in his initial perception of the situation on February 28<sup>th</sup>—that that they were “in the fifth Seal,” and that the entire situation might well have a tragic ending. In other words, the FBI played the perfect part of “Babylon” throughout, validating in every detail the interpretations of Scripture of both Koresh and his followers.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Koresh, like many devout prophetic interpreters since the early Christian period, used the term “Babylon” to symbolically refer to the political, social, and religious system of the dominant culture.

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

*And when He broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the*

*earth?” And there was given to each of them a white robe; and they were told that they should rest for a little while longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren who were to be killed even as they had been, should be completed also (Rev 6:9-11).*

This 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). In other words, it is the last major event leading up to the end of human history. 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 group. Koresh connected this with Psalm 2, which tells of a final confrontation between the “kings of the earth” and an anointed one or “messiah.” Based on this possible interpretation of events, the killing had begun on February 28th. From the Branch Davidian point of view, the six members of their family who had been killed had died for no other reason than they were studying the Bible with David Koresh, and thus branded as part of a “cult.” In other words, they gave their lives “for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held” which is precisely what the book of Revelation says. Accordingly, the group is now told *to wait* for a “little season” until the rest would also be slain. The martyrdom of those remaining inside Mt. Carmel would lead to the sixth Seal, which would bring on the judgment of God to the world. As long as Koresh and his followers believed the fulfillment of this fifth Seal was upon them, based on this particular prophetic scenario, they would view their impending deaths as inevitable.

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, Koresh had taught for years that 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 or even beyond, not in 1993, based on their calculations of the end-time drawn from the book of Daniel. Koresh had told his followers that he, as this final Koresh/Christ figure, would be inevitably required at some point in the future 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 such a Davidic figure. However, beginning in 1990, and particularly following the Gulf War in 1991, Koresh began to speculate that at least a portion of this final scenario might be fulfilled in Texas rather than Israel. Although Saddam Hussein had not fulfilled the latter part of Daniel 11, it certainly appeared that he had inaugurated the process. This shift in focus from Israel to Texas was increasingly discussed, according to surviving Davidians, as Koresh became more and more convinced that those living at Mt. Carmel might well be challenged by the Federal authorities for their behavior. It was this uncertainty which offered the best hope for a peaceful resolution of the situation. At one point on the afternoon of February 28, the very day of the initial raid, Koresh spoke live over Dallas radio station KRLD with the station manager. He asked Koresh how he felt about the BATF agents that were killed and wounded that morning. Koresh answered with emphatic passion, "My friend, it was *unnecessary*." He goes on to say 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.<sup>15</sup> In the KRLD conversation Koresh describes his cordial relationship with local McLennan County Sheriff Jack Harwell and

other law enforcement officers, including undercover BATF agent Robert Rodriguez who had tried to infiltrate the group earlier that year. The 911 tapes, made on the same day within minutes of the BATF raid, also reveal a panicked group inside Mt. Carmel who desperately wanted the authorities to back off. On March 7th the group recorded a one hour video of Koresh with his wives and children. In this video Koresh addresses the federal authorities in a most accommodating manner, stating his desire to peacefully resolve the situation, while still sharply blaming them for initiating the entire encounter. At the end of the tape he says “Hopefully God will grant us more time.”

<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it is the case that nearly a year earlier, in July, 1992, when BATF agents had questioned Waco gun dealer Henry McMahon in their initial investigation of the Branch Davidians, Koresh had actually invited them to come out to Mt. Carmel and talk. He later faxed copies of his arms purchase receipts to McMahan to assist him in responding to the BATF inquiry. See the interview with Henry McMahon, in “Waco: Behind the Cover-up,” *Soldier of Fortune*, November, 1993, pp. 36-41, 71-72.

All of this indicates that Koresh did not see the February 28th confrontation as some inevitable fulfillment of the final prophetic scenario which he had proclaimed to his followers in such detail. Some things did not match, other things were open-ended and yet to be determined, and surely the *major* fulfillment of his prophetic scenario was to take place in Jerusalem during the time when the “king of the North” made his next move. Still, Koresh had been wounded on February 28th, six members of his group had been killed, and he was now confronted by official agents of the United States government, whom Adventists had historically identified as destined to lead the forces of spiritual “Babylon” at the time of the End. It is clear from conversations with surviving

Branch Davidians who were inside Mt. Carmel that they feared the overwhelmingly superior government forces might come in forcefully and slaughter them all at any moment. Given these ambiguities, Koresh was convinced that the attack on February 28th was at least related to the final sequence of events foretold in biblical prophecy, but he was uncertain of what he was to do. So, although the apocalyptic *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.

The one thing that was consistently reported in the media regarding Koresh’s teaching was his claim to be able to “open the Seven Seals” of the book of Revelation. Most biblical scholars would date the final redaction of this mysterious final book of the New Testament around 90 C. E., associating it with the terror filled reign of the Roman emperor Domitian. In Revelation 4 and 5, John the visionary, is taken to heaven where he sees God sitting on a throne, holding a scroll in his right hand, sealed with seven wax seals. At first, no one in heaven or on earth is worthy and able to open this mysteriously sealed book. Then a great proclamation is made: a Lamb with seven eyes, who has been slain, is declared worthy to open the seals. In chapter 6 this Lamb proceeds to open the book, removing one seal at a time. As each seal is sequentially opened, an episode ensues, described in veiled, symbolic language: successive riders on horses that are white, red, black, and pale, followed by a scenes of famine, martyrdom, heavenly signs, and an earthquake—and finally the Seventh Seal itself. However, the Seventh Seal turns out to include another sequence of seven events—the Seven Trumpets (chapters 8-11),

which in turn lead to a final series of seven, the Seven Plagues, poured out from vials upon the earth (chapter 16). The entire book is an unfolding sequence of dramatic events which usher in the Kingdom of God and the reign of Christ on earth, as described in the latter chapters of the book. In other words the Seven Seals actually comprise and initiate the unfolding of the entire book, step by step. Consequently, to be able to “open the Seven Seals” is to explain and set forth the entire book of Revelation.

Yet Koresh understood much more by this phrase. And here my model of apocalyptic dynamics, built upon *Text*, *Interpreter*, and *Context*, must be modified and expanded somewhat. Koresh often said he had been sent both to “explain and *to do* the prophetic Scriptures.” In other words, opening these seals involved explaining their mysterious meaning, but also actually bringing them into historical reality. So to “open a seal” was ultimately *to usher in* its actual accomplishment on earth. This has to do with Koresh’s self-understanding and identity. As he saw things, he was not merely one interpreter among many, but *THE* final Interpreter of *all* the mysteries and revelations of God. He began to identify himself with a certain “Prophetic Voice” that runs through specific texts of the Hebrew Prophets and is also found in the Psalms. I think there is good evidence that other “messianic” types in Jewish and Christian history have identified with these same texts, and sought to appropriate this Voice—including the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran and likely Jesus himself.

Koresh claimed to be that Lamb who takes and opens the sealed book as portrayed in Revelation chapter 5. But this claim was not a denial that Jesus Christ was also a “Lamb” of God. The Lamb is described as the “Lion of the Tribe of Judah, the Root of David” (Rev 5:5). Christians have traditionally understood this as a clear and exclusive reference

to Jesus Christ. Koresh argued otherwise. He pointed out that the entire book of Revelation, though revealed by Jesus Christ, and written by John in the first century, was only to be understood and accomplished shortly before the end of history. The opening verses of the book say it was given to “reveal to his servants things which must *shortly* come to pass” and that “the time is at hand.” As Koresh explained it, this could only refer to a time far into the future from that of Jesus of Nazareth, when the events described in the book would be “at hand.” In other words, Revelation would remain a closed and sealed book *until* the appearance at some future point of a “Lamb,” who would open, and ultimately usher in, the entire sequence of prophetic fulfillment. Koresh held that the entire book was written from the standpoint of a later time, so that it functions as a kind of proleptic message for the last generation.

So, Koresh did understand himself as a “Christ” figure, but not in the sense that he thought he was Jesus of Nazareth, the “Christ” whom he believed that God had sent in the first century. As he often told his followers: the English word Christ, taken from the Greek word *Christos* comes from the Hebrew word “messiah.” It means one who is anointed or chosen. It is a title, not a name, and is commonly used in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible for all the kings and priests of Israel. Koresh believed that just as God sent Jesus of Nazareth as a “Christ,” to his generation, to accomplish a certain mission, there would also appear, prior to the end of time, a final manifestation of a Christ figure. He pointed out that according to the book of Hebrews such a Christ figure had also appeared two thousand years before Jesus, in the person of the enigmatic priest Melchizedek, in the time of Abraham (Heb 7:1-4). Accordingly, the Branch Davidians understood the term “Christ,” not as a single historical figure, but as the manifestation of

the “Word of God” (John 1:1), through a human agent, who thus *became* the anointed Son of God. Koresh claimed to have that same “Spirit of Christ” that came upon Jesus of Nazareth at his baptism, the one that the book of Revelation calls the “Spirit of prophecy” (Rev 19:10). In some of his tapes, as he attempts to explain this metaphor of the Lamb, whom he believed in a certain sense also referred to Jesus Christ, he put it like this, “The Lamb [Jesus] *has* a Christ, the Lamb sends a bird with a message.” So he could affirm Jesus as the Lamb, but he believed that now another manifestation had appeared.

Koresh relied chiefly on the Psalms to show that such a manifestation of “Christ” could not be limited to Jesus of Nazareth. In Psalm 110:4 a descendent of David, king of ancient Israel, is addressed as “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek,” which for Koresh provided the link between the “Christ” of Abraham’s day, Melchizedek, and subsequent manifestations. This understanding of Melchizedek he found supported in the New Testament by the writer of the book of Hebrews, who presents him as:

*He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest for ever. See how great he is! (Heb 7:3-4a).*

The Dead Sea scroll community shared this exalted view of Melchizedek, and expected him to appear as an anointed Redeemer figure in the end-time. It appears, based on a fragmented but precious text from Cave 4, that they also identified this heavenly Melchizedek figure with the anointed “Messenger of the Spirit” predicted in Isaiah 61:1-4—the one who brings “Good Tidings” (see *11Q13*, Col. 2). There is every reason to conclude, based on this citation, that they are identifying the role of their Teacher of

Righteousness with that of the exalted Melchizedek figure. Such a view is hardly surprising in view of the astonishing language of heavenly exaltation found in several other related fragments from Qumran. Indeed, these texts appear to reflect the claims of the Teacher himself to have ascended to heaven and taken his seat among the Holy Ones above (4Q491, frag. 11; 4Q471b).<sup>16</sup> Of course the early Christians cited Isaiah 61 as well, applying it to Jesus, and indeed, Luke alters Mark's Gospel here and centers his opening scene for Jesus' ministry in Nazareth on the fulfillment of this very text (Luke 4:14-30). The Isaiah 61 text clearly lies behind the pericope in the Synoptic Q source where John the Baptist sends word *from prison*, asking Jesus whether he is the "one to come or should we look for another" (Luke 7:18-23). One of the tasks of this figure was to "set free the captives," so John's query is certainly apropos. As it turns out, the precise wording of Jesus' reply to John in this text from the Q source is one of our closest New Testament parallels to a Dead Sea text, namely 4Q521, that specifies the role and task of the Messiah.<sup>17</sup> This point was extremely important in Koresh's theology because it showed that a "Christ" had appeared 2000 years before Jesus Christ, and so, he concluded, it surely would not be so surprising that one would appear 2000 years after. According to Revelation 10:7, which was an absolutely crucial verse for the Davidians, it was "in the days of the voice of the seventh angel (or messenger), when he shall begin to sound, the mystery of God should be finished, as he declared to his servants the prophets." Koresh claimed to be that final seventh messenger, and thus it would be to him that the full mystery of the prophets would be revealed. It is significant that the Habakkuk Commentary from Qumran speaks of the Teacher of Righteousness in a similar way:

<sup>16</sup> Michael Wise has convincingly argued that these texts, that apparently belong to a collection of songs related to our Thanksgiving Scroll (*IQH*), celebrate the career of the Teacher in autobiographical style (“Seated at the Right Hand of God,” paper delivered in the Qumran Section, Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting, New Orleans, November 24, 1996). This view is now supported in the official publication of the text in the Milik festschrift, by Esther Eshel, “4Q471b: A Self-Glorification Hymn,” *Revue de Qumran* 17 (1996): 175-203.

<sup>17</sup> See my study with Michael Wise, “4Q521 ‘On Resurrection’ and the Synoptic Gospel Tradition: A Preliminary Study,” in *Qumran Questions*, edited by James Charlesworth (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 151-163.

*[This passage {Habakkuk 1:5} refers to] the traitors with the Man of the<sup>2</sup>Lie, because they did not [listen to the words of] the Teacher of Righteousness from the mouth of<sup>3</sup>God. It also refers to the trai[tors to the] New [Covenant], because they did not<sup>4</sup>believe in God’s covenant [and desecrated] his holy name; and finally, it refers [to the trai]tors in the latter<sup>6</sup>days. They are the cru[el Israel]ites who will not believe<sup>7</sup>when they hear everything that [is to come upon] the latter generation that will be spoken by<sup>8</sup>the Priest in whose [heart] God has put [the ability] to explain all<sup>9</sup>the words of his servants the prophets, through [whom] God has foretold<sup>10</sup>everything that is to come upon his people and [ . . . ] (1QpHab 2:1-10 emphasis added).<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>18</sup> Quotations from the Dead Sea Scrolls are taken from the translation by Michael Wise, Martin Abegg, and Edward Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A New Translation* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996).

Koresh argued that the reference in Revelation to the “days of the seventh messenger,” was an unequivocal reference to the last times, *not* to the time of Jesus. Just prior to this pivotal verse another angel declares that “there should be delay no longer” (Rev 10:6b), so obviously, Koresh emphasized that these matters apply to the last days of human history. What is so striking is that he might just as well have quoted the Qumran commentary on Habakkuk and applied the language to himself—the result would have been the same.

This expectation of a succession of “Christ figures” is not unique in the history of Christianity. Some early Jewish-Christian groups, such as the Ebionites, apparently held views that were somewhat similar.<sup>19</sup> They believed that the “Christ Spirit” had appeared in numerous forms through the ages, in figures like Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. As they expressed it, “the Christ [True Prophet] from the beginning of the world is hastening through the ages.” (*Pseudo-Clementine Recognitions* 2.22). Of course they held that Jesus of Nazareth, at his baptism, received this “Christ Spirit” in a fullness that made him unique. He was the “beloved son,” whom God had chosen as Messiah. Psalm 2:7 was very important to such groups. There God declares to his anointed (Christ) “You are my Son; this day have I begotten you.” Of course the Ebionites did not believe any further “Christs” would appear after Jesus. For such groups he was the final and ultimate manifestation of the phenomenon—the fullness of the Spirit had “rested upon him.” Accordingly, Koresh’s assertion, that the two appearances of Christ (the First and Second Coming) involve two separate human individuals—first Jesus and then himself—is somewhat unique.

<sup>19</sup> On their history and theology see H. J. Schoeps, *Jewish Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 68-73 as well as the texts collected by A. F. J. Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

Psalm 45 is the key to the First Seal, according to Koresh's interpretation. Here the King is anointed, that is made "Christ," and rides his horse triumphantly (verses 1-7). This is parallel to Revelation 6:1-2 and 19:7-19—so this figure is none other than the Lamb. After conquering his enemies, the marriage feast takes place. This Lamb marries virgin "daughters" and has many children who are destined to rule with him over the earth (Psa 45:10-17). Jesus of Nazareth, though anointed as Christ, never fulfilled this role 2000 years ago. Accordingly, Koresh believed that Psalm 45, along with several other key Messianic texts, could not apply to this appearance of Jesus Christ of the first century. Jesus never married and had children, as this text requires. Koresh maintained that Psalm 40 also speaks of the same figure: "Then said I, Lo, I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God, yea thy law is within my heart" (verses 6-7). The text goes on to speak of this one as having "iniquities more than the hairs of mine head" (verse 12). This so-called "sinful messiah" is none the less the one written of in the scroll—that Koresh connected, obviously, to the Seven Sealed Scroll of Revelation 6. Koresh further argued that the same figure is mentioned in Isaiah 45:1 and called by name: "Thus says the LORD, to his anointed (Christ), to Cyrus (*Koresh* in Hebrew), whose right hand I have held, to subdue nations before him ..." This Cyrus, or Koresh, is called Christ. His mission is to destroy Babylon. Historians have understood this text to refer to the ancient Persian King Cyrus, who literally destroyed ancient Babylon. But there is a deeper spiritual and prophetic meaning according to Koresh. The book of

Revelation appears to designate the religious-political system of the Roman Empire as “mystery Babylon the Great” (compare 1 Peter 4:13). Koresh quoted Revelation 18:2: “Babylon is fallen, is fallen,” to support his view that “Babylon” must fall twice.

Accordingly, the last Babylon is defeated by the last Christ/Koresh.

Koresh found his role described in great detail in Isaiah 40-66. Some these texts in Isaiah appear to be addressed to an individual, the very figure Koresh claimed to be. It was as if such Scriptures had been written just for him. For example, “Assemble yourselves and hear, which among them has declared these things, Yahweh has *loved him*: he will do his pleasure on Babylon, and his arm shall be on the Chaldeans” (Isa 48:14). This text was of particular importance to Koresh as a succinct statement of his mission: that God loved him, and as the arm of Yahweh he would bring down Babylon. The text goes on, with God speaking in the first person about this figure:

*I, even I, have spoken, yes I have called him, I have brought him, and he shall make his way prosperous. Come near to me, and hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I: and now the Lord Yahweh and his Spirit has sent me” (Isa 48:15-16, emphasis added).*

This verse was instrumental in Koresh’s understanding of the notion of Christ, as explained above. Here Yahweh sends one with his Spirit, that same Christ Spirit that was with him from the beginning. It is as if that Spirit, speaking through Isaiah, takes up the first person, but then switches to the third person—in other words the prophetic “I” who is with Yahweh in the beginning, embodies the “him” who is sent. The text goes on to say: “Go forth from Babylon, flee from the Chaldeans...” (v. 20), which the Davidians understood as yet another reference to their upcoming flight to Israel.

There are dozens of references to a mysterious “servant” of Yahweh in Isaiah 40-55. Most of these appear to refer to nation of Israel, who is called, metaphorically, God’s Servant (e.g., Isa 42:21). However, the four sections of Isaiah that biblical scholars call the “Servant Songs,” are distinguished in both style and content and have often been understood, by both Jews and Christians, to refer to single individual (Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). This individual is, in fact, contrasted with the Servant nation, that is said to be deaf and blind (Isa 42:19). The New Testament applies each of these “Songs” to Jesus. In the Dead Sea Scrolls, particularly in the Thanksgiving Hymns (*IQHodayot*), these texts and ideas were applied to the Teacher of Righteousness as well. The author declares, “These things I know through your understanding, for *you have opened my ears to wonderful mysteries . . .*” (*IQH* 9:21). And further, “For You, O my God, have concealed me from the children of men, and Your law You have hidden in [me] until the time you reveal Your salvation to me” (*IQH* 13:11). In one section he clearly appears to have the role of the figure addressed in Isaiah 50:4 in mind: “[And] You, my God, have appointed me as a holy counsel to the weary. You [have taught me] Your covenant, and my tongue is as one of Your disciples” (*IQH* 15:10). It is clear in the Scrolls that the community’s expectation focused on the arrival of *the* “Prophet like Moses.” He was not understood to be merely one among many, but the final revelator, who would inaugurate and orchestrate the events of the End. In our main copy of the *Community Rule*, the group is clearly expecting the arrival of such a one, flanked by his two anointed assistants:

*They shall govern themselves using the original precepts by which the men of the Yachad began to be instructed, doing so until there come the Prophet and the Messiahs of Aaron and Israel (1QS 9:10, emphasis added).*

This idea of the two messiahs, one Priestly and the other Davidic, appears to be drawn from Zechariah 4:14, but appears to have been modified somewhat with the arrival of the Teacher of Righteousness.<sup>20</sup> The anticipation of the arrival of the Prophet as reflected in the *Damascus Document*, the early copies of which I take to be written *before* such a Teacher had arrived (in contrast to Text A, Col 1, that looks back on his career, as does the fragment of Text B), appears to base its hopes for this “coming one” on the texts of Scripture. Numbers 21:18 and 24:17 are both understood to predict the arrival of an Interpreter (*Doresh*) of the Torah, who will “teach righteousness in the last days” (*CD*, Text A Col 6:2-11; 7:17-19), and Deuteronomy 18:18 is directly cited in *4Q175*. It seems clear to me that in *CD* Text B, the *Community Rule*, and the *Habakkuk Pesher*, he has not only appeared but has been killed, fueling the certainty of the community that there were indeed living in the last generation (final 40 year period, see *CD* Text B Col. 20:1; *4Q171*). Indeed, the *Habakkuk Pesher* appears to focus primarily on the crisis of faith sparked by the failure of the End to arrive. The text promises a reward to those who hold steady in their faith in the Teacher of Righteousness, which means in context, not abandoning the authenticity of his mission in both predicting and bringing about the End (*1QpHab* 6-7).

<sup>20</sup> All the references in *CD* Text B are singular, one not two messiah. The same idea of two messiahs, flanking Jesus as the center Figure (the Lampstand) is found in the book of Revelation (11:4).

David Koresh, as one might expect, tried to demonstrate that these sections of Isaiah addressed a final Christ figure, namely “Cyrus,” conqueror of Babylon, who was to appear before the end of history. This teaching was of enormous influence upon his students, who became convinced that these texts did not and could not apply to Jesus. Given their unfaltering faith in the inspiration of the Bible, they became convinced that David Koresh was indeed the one he claimed to be, a final Christ or “Servant” of Yahweh. Koresh argued, for example, that the servant mentioned in Isaiah 49:1-4 is actually introduced in the previous chapter as the one who will lead God’s people out of Babylon and eventually even destroy the Babylonians (48:14-20). The text also says this one will “raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the preserved of Israel” (Isa 49:6). Certainly Jesus never did this, and Koresh connected such a task with Revelation 7, where the “messenger from the east,” the very one he claimed to be, gathers his 144,000 from the twelve tribes of Israel.

Koresh found every detail of the origin and mission of this figure meticulously described in Scripture. For example, this one is to come from the north and the east (Isa 41:1-2, 25; 46:11). The one who comes from the “north” is the one who comes from God’s throne, which is said to be in the north part of the heavens (Psa 48:2; Isa 14:13; Job 26:7). When John has his vision in Revelation 4 he is told to “come up hither,” to heaven, which would be, in the cosmic configuration that Koresh imagined, to ascend to the north. Koresh believed that he too had been before the throne of God in the north, and had now returned with the sealed book in his hand. Koresh claimed that the reference to the “east” referred to his own revelation in Israel in 1985, a far country to the east of the United States. Since the United States, in his view, was the very “seat of modern Babylon,” this

figure comes from Israel to the United States to deliver his message. Koresh connected these references in Isaiah to Revelation 7:2: “And I saw another angel ascending *from the east*, having the seal of the living God . . .” This one from the east was to come to “Babylon,” and call out the faithful ones, first spiritually and later literally. Koresh expected that his followers, who would eventually number 144,000, would someday move to Israel, and actually participate in the final events of the end described in Daniel 11:40-45 as set forth above. All of these events, described in such detail in the prophets, the Davidians understood in the most literal way and constantly discussed in great detail. They often referred to Isaiah 2 and Micah 4, and the actual kingdom or government which God was to set up in Jerusalem, in the Land of Israel, following the events of Daniel 11.

Koresh found reference to this second “Christ” figure, whom Isaiah calls a “ravenous bird from the east” (46:11) in other biblical texts that have not traditionally been understood in an apocalyptic context. For example, Ecclesiastes 12 contains a number of poetic images such as the sun being darkened, the “keepers of the house” trembling, the “strong men” being bent, and the “grinders” being few (12:2-3). These appear to be fairly transparent references to the obvious characteristics of old age: dimming eyes, trembling hands, stooped legs, and loss of teeth. However, in verse 4 there is a reference to one “rising up at the voice of the bird,” whom Koresh equated to the “bird from the east” in Isaiah. On this basis Koresh saw the entire chapter as an apocalyptic poem about the end of the age. The “evil days” of verse 1 he took to be the tribulations of the end of history, rather than old age. The heavenly signs, with sun darkened and stars falling, mentioned in verse 2, he paralleled to the Sixth Seal of the book of Revelation, and also to the “Synoptic

Apocalypse” in which Jesus predicted this precise sequence of events (Rev 6:13; Matt 24:29). The “keepers of the house trembling” would then refer to the kings and rulers who will tremble with fear when the great Day of Judgment is manifested as described in Revelation 6:15-17:

*And the kings of the earth, and the great men, and the rich men, and the chief captains, and the mighty men . . . hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains and said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us, and hide us from the face of him that sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.*

The text in Ecclesiastes goes on to say that “they will be afraid of that which is high,” which Koresh saw as an apt description of this very passage in Revelation.

Koresh further expanded this concept, pulling in what he felt were parallel images throughout the Bible. For example, this “bird” or messenger from the east, mentioned in Isaiah 46:12, is also called the “arm of Yahweh” in related passages such as Isaiah 52:10-12 and Isaiah 40:10-11. In other words, he is the instrument who gathers this final remnant people from Babylon and takes them to the Land of Israel (Isa 52:10-12). To establish that this metaphor of the “arm of Yahweh” refers to a specific individual, Koresh would incorporate other texts, particularly from the Psalms. Psalm 80:17 says: “Let your hand be upon the *man of your right hand*, upon the son of man whom you made strong for yourself.” Psalm 89:13,27 directly speaks of this Davidic ruler or Messiah: “You have a mighty arm, strong is your hand, and high is your right hand . . . also I will *make him* my first born, higher than the kings of the earth.” Accordingly, the

Davidians believed, that this “man of the right hand” is none other than the son of David, the Messiah, or Koresh, conqueror of Babylon.

According to Koresh, this figure is also called the Branch, or sprout of David. Isaiah 11 gives a sketch of his career (vv. 1-2). This “Branch” figure is also mentioned in Isaiah 4:2, Jeremiah 23:5, and Zechariah 3:8. In each of these contexts Koresh would attempt to show that the accomplishments of the figure were not those of Jesus, but would be those of the final Christ. To connect this “Branch” figure with the “arm of Yahweh” mentioned in other texts, Koresh used Psalm 80:15, which speaks of the “Branch that you have made strong for yourself,” and in the following verses speaks of this one as the “man of your right hand.” The name Branch Davidian, of course, is connected to these ideas; namely, that one from the line of king David would reign literally in Jerusalem. It was unnecessary for David Koresh to claim literal, biological, lineage from king David, which is the historical meaning of this language about the Branch figure. In Isaiah 11:1 the “Branch” comes from the line of Jesse, the father of King David of Israel. This is why the New Testament writers go to such pains to demonstrate that Jesus of Nazareth is of this lineage (Matt 1; Luke 3). Koresh argued, for example, that the servant of Isaiah 49:1-4, is actually introduced in the previous chapter. He is the one who leads God’s people out of Babylon, and actually destroys the Babylonians (48:14-20). The text also says he will “raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the preserved of Israel” (49:6). This Koresh connected with Revelation 7, where the “messenger from the east” gathers his 144,000 from each of the tribes of Israel and preserves them from the forthcoming wrath of God’s judgment. He maintained that Jesus never did any of these things, yet they would be accomplished by this final messenger.

In my judgment there is much we can learn from the career and self-understanding of David Koresh in our studies of Messianism. Beyond the more general characteristics of this particular apocalyptic community that I find to be fairly commonplace in the history of such movements, Koresh's appropriation of a specific set of texts from the Hebrew Scriptures, that in his judgment addressed him directly and personally, is most worthy of analysis. He becomes for us a contemporary example, if not in personality and style, in exegetical strategy, of how such claimants to the messianic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures, appropriate and live within their parameters. The notion of a living Prophet, who is at the same time "more than a Prophet," but indeed, *the* Prophet like Moses, adds significantly to our understanding of the dynamics of such apocalyptic systems.