

PROPHECY AS INSPIRED BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: THE TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS AND DAVID KORESH

Lester L. Grabbe

As scholars we sometimes strive to understand ancient groups and sects by a rather myopic pouring over tattered manuscripts, obscure language, and scattered remains in the dust, without always realizing that such groups and sects still flourish in our contemporary world. Using modern analogies to understand ancient data has its own hazards, but it can provide concrete examples of what might otherwise be only conjecture in a vacuum.

In my opinion, prophecy is a rather broader phenomenon than some scholars allow and includes attempts to understand the future by means of “inspired” textual interpretation.¹ To illustrate this phenomenon I have chosen the ancient Jewish figure of the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness who will be compared with the modern prophet of the Branch Davidian group known as David Koresh, who was killed in Waco, Texas, by Federal agents in 1993.² As it happens, both prophetic figures expounded a large part of Nahum and Habakkuk (summarized in the Comparative section below), which serves as a good example on which to compare their methods of exegesis.

David Koresh

Since most readers will already have a basic acquaintance with the Teacher of Righteousness,³ I shall focus on David Koresh. The group led by Koresh had its origins in the Seventh-Day Adventist (SDA) church. A Bulgarian

1. For a discussion of this broader view of prophecy, see Grabbe 2003.

2. With regard to sources, it will be clear that I am heavily dependent on Tabor and Gallagher 1995 for background and for some information on David Koresh’s teachings. Where no source is cited, my information has usually been from Tabor and Gallagher. Wherever possible, however, I have depended on transcriptions of Koresh’s taped Bible studies. A list of these, along with the abbreviations used in this study, is given under “Koresh” in the bibliography. The discussion of Nahum and Habakkuk in the “Shower Head Tape” (Showerhead) is summarized in the Comparison section in this article and is cited below simply as “Comparison.”

3. For a summary, see Knibb 2000.

immigre Victor Houteff was disfellowshipped from the SDA church for his teaching on prophecy (that a literal “Davidian” kingdom of God would be set up in Palestine before Christ’s return) and formed his own group in 1935, called the Davidian Seventh-Day Adventists. They bought land near Waco, Texas, and settled there in what they called Mt Carmel. When Houteff died in 1955, his wife took over and predicted his resurrection in 1959. However, one group under a man called Benjamin Roden did not accept her authority and broke away to form the Branch Davidians, after the messianic figure called “the Branch” in Isa 11:1 and Zech 3:8; 6:12. When Houteff was not resurrected, the group split up, a number going over to Roden. When Roden died in 1978, his wife Lois became the leader. In 1981, a young man named Vernon Howell joined and rose rapidly in influence. Howell had a vision in 1983, with a more formative one following in 1985 (apparently other visions came later), whereafter he became leader designate, with the support of Lois Roden who subsequently died in 1986. Her son George Roden claimed the right of leadership and tried to force Howell out, but Howell eventually succeeded in gaining control of the Mt Carmel property and community.

Howell’s forte lay in expounding the Bible to small groups of followers, focusing particularly on its prophetic message. He wrote very little, and his teachings were mainly made known to a wider group by means of tape recordings. The backbone of his message was the book of Revelation (cf. Seven Seals: 197; Seventh). Daniel was also very important (see especially Joel), but Koresh brought in a surprising number of other books that one would not immediately think of as prophetic, such as the Psalms. The third, fourth, fifth, and sixth angel of Revelation were identified as Ellen White (the SDA prophet), Houteff, Benjamin Roden, and Lois Roden (Seventh; Judge). He identified himself as the seventh angel (Rev 10:7; 11:15), as well as the Lamb (Rev 5:6), and the angel from the east (Rev 7:2), who was responsible for opening the seven seals of the sealed book (= the Bible to whose interpretation he had the key); he would also seal the 144,000 (Rev 7) righteous individuals to be saved (Judge; Seventh; Foundation). In addition, he saw himself as “Cyrus” (Isa 44:26–45:6), a modern-day messiah and the son of God (Ps 45), who would overthrow “Babylon,” “those who go against the revealed truth” (Foundation)—which seems to include both the other “false” churches (Showerhead) and also human governments (Tabor and Gallagher 1995: 60).⁴ This is why he changed his name to “Koresh” (Hebrew version of Cyrus). “Assyria” (America), would take over Palestine/Israel,

4. Koresh’s own identification of himself with various biblical figures and images seems to be laid out in his undated letter to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SDA Letter). The letter is phrased in the first person and, although much of it is a quote from or allusion to biblical passages, matches claims found in other sources. For his claims about Cyrus, see Showerhead.

claiming to be a religious nation (Showerhead [Comparison: *passim*]). The Branch Davidians would fight Israel against Assyria, and Koresh himself would be killed (Showerhead [Comparison: Hab 2:7–11; 3:1]). He would later be resurrected to lead the Branch Davidians and an army of 200 million, righteous individuals from the past resurrected (Rev 9:16; Showerhead [Comparison: Hab 1:14–17; 3:1]; Breault 1992).

*Comparison of the Teacher and Koresh
on Nahum and Habakkuk*

*Nahum*⁵

Nah 1:2

Qumran: vacat.

Koresh: God hates the kings of the north.

Nah 1:3–4

Qumran: the sea is the Kittim who will be eliminated from the earth.

Koresh: Micah 1 says the mountains will be brought down and molten before God.

Nah 1:5–7

Qumran: broken text but apparently identifies Bashan with the Kittim.

Koresh: “trust in him” refers to trust in God’s word.

Nah 1:12–14

Qumran: vacat.

Koresh: the one who passes through is Cyrus. The yoke is the King of the North’s yoke that will be broken from God’s people. The commandment given by God refers to the King of the North who worships Jesus Christ.

Nah 1:15–2:2

Qumran: vacat.

Koresh: the Jews are told to keep their festivals. This passage describes a religious war. American troops devastate Jerusalem and take all the food, which Joel 1 also describes. God will bring it all to an end.

5. The sources for this section are 1QpNahum for Qumran and Showerhead tape for Koresh.

Nah 2:3–4

Qumran: vacat.

Koresh: “chariots” refers to war tanks. The Americans will defeat the Israelis, despite their superior weapons.

Nah 2:5–8

Qumran: vacat.

Koresh: the King of the North will be spoiled by God’s people. Huzzab is Babylon the Great, a hartlot to be identified with Assyria. It is explained by Mic 7.

Nah 2:11(?)–13

Qumran: this refers to Demetrius the king of “Greece” (i.e. the Seleucid king) who sought to enter Jerusalem but did not succeed because God had not given Jerusalem into the hands of the Greek kings from Antiochus to the appearance of the chiefs of the Kittim. The lion refers to the Lion of Wrath who went against the Seekers after Smooth Things and hanged men alive.

Koresh: the King of the North is connected with Gog and Magog whose weapons will be burned for seven years. Nineveh refers to America.

Koresh’s exposition ends at this point, though 4QpNahum continues into Nah 3.

*Habakkuk⁶**Hab 1:1–3*

Qumran: broken text.

Koresh: the spoiler is the King of the North.

Hab 1:4–5

Qumran: the righteous man is the Teacher of Righteousness.

Koresh: the wicked are persecuting God’s people, and the world labels the latter as evil. The heathen will not believe, but God will marry a woman and have children.

6. The sources for this section are 1QpHabakkuk for Qumran and the Showerhead tape for Koresh.

Hab 1:6–10

- Qumran: this concerns the traitors in the last days with the Man of the Lie who do not believe in the words of the Teacher of Righteousness. The Chaldeans are the Kittim who move across the plain and pillage the cities, who trample the land. The rulers of the Kittim capture the people's fortresses.
- Koresh: the Chaldeans represent the King of the North coming into Palestine. The eagles are a symbol of Assyria. They will take everyone captive, as Dan 11 describes, as well as the treasures of Egypt and Ethiopia.

Hab 1:11

- Qumran: the leaders of the Kittim who take advice from the house of guilty people.
- Koresh: the King of the North hears something (cf. Nah 2:5–8): it is the “king of the Jews.” The King of the North decides not to take over all the East but will return to Palestine and subdue the people there. He intervenes because of a Middle East crisis and defeats Egypt, but America supports the Arabs and intervenes to avoid losing Palestine. The King of the North imputes his victory to the power of Jesus Christ.

Hab 1:12–13

- Qumran: God will not destroy his people by the hand of the nations, but by the hand of his chosen ones God will give judgment over all the nations. The “wicked person who devours the one more righteous than himself” is the House of Absalom and the men of their council who kept silent and did not help the Teacher of Righteousness against the Man of the Lie.
- Koresh: the King of the North sees a vision of people who are alive and cannot die. These are God's people who will be scattered but not killed. The righteous man who is devoured is described in Isa 57 and is the messenger bringing good tidings (Nah 1:15).

Hab 1:14–17

- Qumran: this refers to the Kittim who sacrifice to their standards and worship their weapons. They apportion their yoke over all the peoples and kill many with the sword
- Koresh: this seems to be taken as a reference to the (false) churches gaining followers: tithing to these churches is like paying a prostitute. But they do not have 200 million followers

(though these followers are asleep at the moment). The King of the North represents that religio-political lamb-riding beast that speaks as a dragon (Rev 13). The beast and its image are an image of a nation professing to follow God, though living by the sword. If God was really on America's side, there would be nothing to worry about from other nations.

Hab 2:1–4

Qumran: God told Habakkuk to write what would happen to the last generation, but he did not tell him. God made known all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets to the Teacher of Righteousness. All the ages of God will come at their fixed time. All those observing the law in the House of Judah will be freed from the house of judgment by God because of their loyalty to the Teacher of Righteousness.

Koresh: the prophet Habakkuk thinks he will fulfil this prophecy and save the King of the North, but this will not happen: the vision is for the last days. But the righteous will by faith—in this prophecy.

Hab 2:5–6

Qumran: this refers to the Wicked Priest who was called by the name of truth at the beginning of his office, but he became arrogant and abandoned God.

Koresh: reference to celebration by king of north after destroying Jerusalem. This proud individual thinks God is with him. Some might think America will not go on the offensive, but it will, thinking it is very macho.

Hab 2:7–11

Qumran: this concerns the priest who rebelled, the last priests of Jerusalem who have gathered spoil from the nations, but in the last days this wealth will be given into the hands of the Kittim army. It concerns the Wicked Priest, who attempted to destroy the Teacher of Righteousness. God will deliver him into the hands of his enemies for punishment.

Koresh: the army of Joel 2, the army of 200 million—dead prophets and martyrs—will rise up out of the ground and divide the spoil. They will support the one being killed (described in Isa 53) because they recognize he has the same spirit as they had and has ratified all that they foresaw. The King of the North

wants Mt Zion and will set up his tent on it, but the messenger on the mountain (Nah 1:15) will inherit Zion. The religious leaders love the King of the North but cannot save him.

Hab 2:12–14

Qumran: the Dripper of the Lie will build a city of blood.

Koresh: “you” will be over there working and scattered by political war and strife. Isaiah 54 speaks of a girl whose husband has been killed, but she loved him because he could teach the Bible better than anyone. She will get to marry the Word of God, the Christ. The Catholic Church is a counterfeit of this.

Hab 2:15–16

Qumran: the Wicked Priest pursued the Teacher of Righteousness to swallow him up on the Day of Atonement. His dishonour will be greater than his glory for not circumcizing the foreskin of his heart, and the cup of God’s anger will swallow him.

Koresh: the King of the North is a homosexual. He will try to solicit “me” (apparently Koresh), offering to save “me” from death if I play along. All the Psalms speak about the King of the North. He keeps Sunday and causes AIDS. He is already alive and working. The one he tries to solicit, who has the title “the bird” (Isa 46:11: “ravenous bird from the east”), understands his problem, however. He has turned many homosexuals to righteousness.

Hab 2:17–20

Qumran: the Wicked Priest will be judged for destruction by God. The city is Jerusalem in which the Wicked Priest did his abominable deeds and defiled God’s holy place. The people’s idols will not save them in the day of judgment.

Koresh: the King of the North destroys Palestine, especially northern Palestine.

Hab 3:1

Qumran: vacat.

Koresh: Shigionoth is a prophet. The psalm in Hab 3 says that God will make “my” feet like hind feet, putting “me” in high places and on the mountains. All the prophets thought they would be this person but were told by God that it would be

someone else. But now “we” are at the end of the road. Isaiah (46:11) tells about the bird that would be killed. God has a mighty army of 200 million that will stand in defence and bring about the fall of Babylon. “You” will be the ones doing the killing and will not be hurt or wounded.

Conclusions

Despite obvious differences in actual interpretation, Koresh and the Teacher’s approach to interpretation have a great deal in common. Here are some of the main points shared:

1. The Bible was primarily written for the end time, and most prophecies have yet to be fulfilled. Predictions for the end time are not limited to the obvious prophetic and apocalyptic literature, however, but seems not to exclude any part of the Scriptures. For example, Psalms are interpreted prophetically by both the Teacher and Koresh.

2. The interpreter is himself living in the end time. This is obvious in that the end-time events—the bulk of which are still future—are nevertheless related to the interpreter’s own times and situation. This even includes some calculation of the chronology of events. Koresh saw significance in his revelation that he was the latter-day Cyrus and his preaching to the SDA church in 1985, which was 70 years after the death of Ellen White in 1915. He also believed that the end—or perhaps the beginning of the end—would come in 1995 (Breault 1992), based in part on Ps 90:10. Similarly, the time of the coming of the Teacher was seen as predicted in Scripture, as well as apparently the end time in relation to his death (Grabbe 1997: 601–602).

3. Scripture is all interrelated, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, in which one part is explained or clarified or supplemented by another part. Behind it seems to lie the view that Scripture explains itself. Both interpreters include many quotations from and cross-references to other passages and texts. The Showerhead tape is a good example of how Koresh relates Nahum, Mic 7, Habakkuk, Isa 44–45, and other passages as if they are all talking about a single coherent end-time scenario.

4. God inspires the interpreter to understand divine mysteries written in the Scripture. Or to put it another way, inspiration seems to be needed for a proper understanding of Scripture. At Qumran, “Its interpretation concerns the Teacher of Righteousness to whom God made known all the mysteries of his servants the prophets’ words” (1QpHab 7:4–5). Several times Koresh stated that inspiration was required to understand certain points: “with inspiration you understand” (Showerhead); “it takes inspiration to bring this lesson out” (Seventh); “it takes inspiration for us to have the answers” (Seventh). He stated, “Prophets were never given the ability to know what

they prophesied about” (Foundation), and went on to imply the spirit of God had given him the ability. This assertion of inspiration is despite Koresh’s constant appeal to Scripture to interpret Scripture. One of Koresh’s claims was to be the Lamb who opened the book—interpreted as the Bible—sealed with seven seals (Foundation).

5. The exposition is often given in highly symbolic and obscure language, so that only the initiated will understand. For example, the main participants at Qumran are designated by symbolic titles (“Wicked Priest,” “Man of the Lie,” “Teacher of Righteousness,” “Kittim”) that have to be interpreted. There is general agreement that the Wicked Priest is one or more Hasmonaeon rulers and the Kittim are the Romans, but many other titles are still very much debatable. Koresh’s Bible studies are often extremely repetitive, covering the same ground again and again, usually using biblical language, without ever being specific about what it refers to. It seems that those present were in many cases assumed to have a good deal of background knowledge already, so that the discussion was perfectly understandable. At other times, however, one senses that he is alluding to identities that he hesitates to make explicit. Thus, in the Seventh tape he seems to be hinting that the seventh angel of Revelation is himself, but he never says so explicitly (though an explicit statement is found in Judge); the March 2 tape is very much cloaked in allusion.

My friend and colleague Philip Davies has always delighted in the unconventional, the different, and the unorthodox in scholarship. I hope he finds this contribution peculiar enough for his liking and happily dedicate it to him.

References

- Breault, Marc A.
1992 “Vernon Howell and the 1995 Deadline” (downloaded from <http://www.fountain.btinternet.co.uk> on 7 October 2004).
- Grabbe, Lester L.
1997 “The 70-Weeks Prophecy (Daniel 9:24–27) in Early Jewish Interpretation,” in Craig A. Evans and Shemaryahu Talmon (eds.), *The Quest for Context and Meaning: Studies in Biblical Intertextuality in Honor of James A. Sanders* (Biblical Interpretation Series 28; Leiden: Brill), 595–611.
2003 “Prophetic and Apocalyptic: Time for New Definitions—and New Thinking,” in Lester L. Grabbe and Robert D. Haak (eds.), *Knowing the End from the Beginning: The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic, and their Relationships* (JSPSup 46; London/New York: T&T Clark International), 107–33.
- Knibb, Michael A.
2000 “Teacher of Righteousness,” in *EDSS*: 918–21.

Koresh, David (formerly Vernon Howell)

Foundation

“The Foundation” (study of October 1989, transcribed by David Bunds, introduced by Mark Swett: <http://www.meta-religion.com>).

Joel

“Study on Joel and Daniel 11” (date not indicated; transcribed by David Bunds; <http://home.maine.rr.com> [now closed down]).

Judge

“Judge What I Say” (study of 4 February 1985, transcribed by David Bunds: <http://www.meta-religion.com>).

March 2

“David Koresh” March 2 Speech on Radio” (tape for radio broadcast on 2 March 1993, transcriber unknown; analytical notes by Stephen Tice and James Trimm: obtained from <http://home.maine.rr.com> [now closed down]).

SDA Letter

“Letter to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church” (no date; transcribed by Marc Breault: <http://www.fountain.btinternet.co.uk>).

Seven Seals

“An Unfinished Manuscript by David Koresh on the Seven Seals of the Book of Revelation” (undated but evidently dictated in April 1993, not long before his death; cited from Tabor and Gallagher 1995: 189–211 which includes accompanying commentary by the authors).

Seventh

“The Seventh Angel: Enter into Rest” (study of 31 January 1985; transcribed by Mark Swett: obtained from <http://home.maine.rr.com> [now closed down]).

Showerhead

“The Shower Head Tape” (study of 24 August 1987, transcribed by Mark Swett: <http://home.maine.rr.com> [now closed down]).

Tabor, James D., and Eugene V. Gallagher

1995 *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California).