

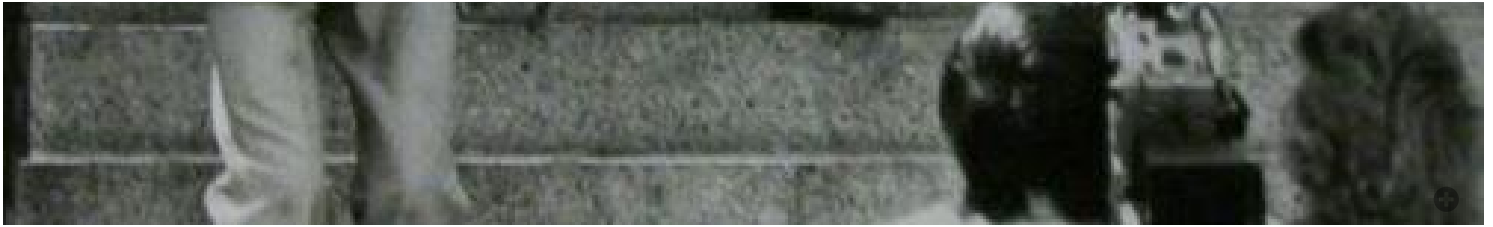


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The Sinful Messiah: Part Two — Religion student Marc Breault is introduced to a bizarre Texas cult

By MARK ENGLAND and DARLENE McCORMICK © 1993 Waco Tribune-Herald Feb 28, 1993





Marc Breault found what he once thought was salvation in a grocery store off the campus of Loma Linda University in Southern California.

Breault was stockpiling groceries for his first week of graduate school in January 1986. His Dallas Cowboys' T-shirt caught the attention of an intense, frail-looking man named Perry Jones.

Jones asked if Breault was from Texas.

No, he was just a fan, Breault told Jones. He had grown up in Hawaii, but he had followed the Cowboys ever since a Roger Staubach-led Super Bowl win over the Miami Dolphins in 1972.

Jones struck up a conversation. He told Breault that he was a journalist for a religious publication in Waco, Texas.

Actually, Jones sold perfume for a living. He was a long-time member of the Branch Davidians, a spinoff of the Seventh-day Adventists with deep roots in the Waco area. Jones had written for Davidian publications, but he was no journalist. He was a believer — a believer in Vernon Howell, his son-in-law and the Branch Davidians' acknowledged prophet and leader.

Recruiting followers

Jones was in California to recruit followers for Howell.

Loma Linda was fertile ground since the university is run by the Seventh-day Adventists, a denomination whose members believe prophecy will flourish in the earth's last days. Their willingness to hear out would-be prophets would provide a bountiful harvest of followers for Howell.

During that first conversation with Breault, Jones talked about trying to introduce Adventist doctrine to TV evangelists Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart.

That interested Breault, who at age 22 was seeking a master's degree in religion. He wanted to be a pastor. Breault had been raised a Catholic but became a Seventh-day Adventist at age 15 after attending a church-sponsored camp for the blind, although he had some vision in his left eye.

Breault gave Jones his telephone number.

Hearing him out

Jones kept in contact. He soon told Breault that he believed his son-in-law, Howell, was inspired. Breault, primed by his religious upbringing, agreed to hear him out. They met in Loma Linda's graduate student lounge.

Howell's literal interpretation of the Bible — which entailed such beliefs as taking the phrase "bride of Christ" to mean an actual woman — intrigued Breault. So did Howell's proclamation that he had the Seventh Angel's message, the last message to be delivered to the church. The message, Breault later learned, was that Howell claimed to be Cyrus, a latter-day king who would lead God's people until the Second Coming of Christ.

Genial, the lanky Breault enjoyed the company of the Branch Davidians. Also, it was a chance for Breault to play keyboards in Howell's rock 'n roll band.

Breault met with the Branch Davidians regularly and later that year attended their Passover services in Palestine, Texas.

He got a crash course in the cult's unorthodox teachings.

Howell told the gathering that God had commanded him to have sex with a 14-year-old girl in the cult, according to Breault and other former cult members.

The girl was hardly a vamp. Former cult member Lisa Gent said the girl was not physically developed. Her grandmother described the teenager as a "simple" person who speaks "in a frail, little-girl voice."

Howell said he approached the girl and told her of God's command, Breault said. They were to unite and have a child called Shoshonna, who would marry Cyrus, Howell's son by Rachel Howell, his legal wife.

The two offspring would rule in God's kingdom.

At first, Howell thought God was testing him, Breault said, by telling him to "give seed" to the girl.

'My Rachel, my Cyrus'

Horrified, Howell reported crying out, "My Rachel, my Cyrus."

But when he heard God repeat his command, Howell said he obeyed, according to Breault and other former cult members.

It wasn't the first time Howell claimed God had given him a woman.

Jean Berlin Chilson said Howell told her late husband, L. Hartley Berlin, in about 1980 that God had given their daughter, Sandy, to him. Berlin was pastor of the Tyler Seventh-day Adventist Church.

"He felt that God wanted him to marry her," Chilson said.

The Berlins barred Howell from seeing their daughter.

But Chilson, who has since remarried and no longer lives in Tyler, said Howell was always supremely confident while at the Tyler church that he knew God's will.

"He would act like he knew every sentence of the Bible," she said. ". . . to uphold anything he wanted."

If the revelation about "giving seed" wasn't enough to send a newcomer packing, Howell, then 26, confirmed that two years earlier he had a sexual relationship with the cult's then prophetess, Lois Roden, Breault said. She was 67.

Roden was at Palestine trying to mend a split with Howell.

Howell reported that God had commanded him to fulfill Isaiah 8:3 with Roden, said Breault and other former cult members.

And I went unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bare a son. Then said the Lord to me, Call his name Maher-shalal-hash-baz.

Roden had indeed become pregnant, Howell told the gathering. But Howell claimed that God caused Roden to miscarry their supposed baby as punishment for giving it the money to her adult children, Breault said.

While Roden also thought she had been pregnant, she blamed the miscarriage on Howell's refusal to share power with her, Breault said.

It is a story Howell denies.

"She was 70 years old, God bless her soul, but she was ugly," he said. "She was in competition with Medusa. But you know old women are beautiful in a different way, you know what I mean . . . It's impossible. I never touched her."

But a former cult member, who fears Howell and asked not to be identified, said Howell's alliance with Roden gave him standing in the Branch Davidians.

"He knew the only way he could present his message was through Lois Roden," the former member said. "But I also think he wanted to unite with her. He greatly admired her when he first came".

Breault said he found the claims by Roden and Howell about the purported baby hard to believe.

A matter of 'guts'

But Howell's "guts" in standing before his followers and admitting sexual relationships with a 14-year-old girl and a 67-year-old woman persuaded Breault of his sincerity.

"To have the guts to blatantly say something that people might see as weird, knowing how people would react, he had to give some sort of conviction, I thought," Breault said. "The way I was looking at it then was that your TV evangelists pretend to be average, normal people. They keep the bad things in the closet. When they come out, they fall. But this guy was saying it straight out."

Breault eventually joined the Branch Davidians in Palestine, the small town in East Texas where Howell took his followers after his split with Lois Roden.

Roden died later in 1986. In a will later invalidated, she left Mount Carmel, the Branch Davidians' longtime home 10 miles east of Waco, near the Elk community, to her son, George. But she left him little else.

Almost all the Branch Davidians lived with Howell. George Roden was dumbfounded. To him, Howell was just a hippie.

Throwback to '60s

Howell did seem a throwback to the '60s, with his flowing brown hair that curved gracefully to below the shoulders, wire-rim glasses, beatific smile and easy talk of peace and love. Younger Branch Davidians gravitated to Howell's persona and his passion for rock music. His almost celestial knowledge of the Bible mystified the older cult members.

For the Branch Davidians, living in Palestine in plywood boxes with their prophet was better than living at Mount Carmel with George.

But, then, that was the story of Roden's life.

"Poor George" is how Barbara Slawson, who had been a devotee of Lois Roden, refers to him.

Crude and Confused

Roden was the son of Ben and Lois Roden, both former leaders of the Branch Davidians, a sect that spun off in the 1930s from the Seventh-day Adventists. George always assumed he would carry on his family's tradition of leadership. A large man with a barrel chest, thick black hair and a menacing presence, Roden had a big problem when it came to aspiring to leadership, though.

Almost no one in the Branch Davidians would accept him as a prophet.

In contrast to Howell, a professed ninth-grade dropout with a preternatural knowledge of the Bible and a folksy manner, Roden came across as crude, clumsy and confused.

As Slawson put it, "His heart was in the right place, but . . ."

Roden had run for president 1976 — with Perry Jones, Howell's future father-in-law, serving as campaign treasurer — on a platform promising to grant 2 percent loans to build homes for aging parents and fight inflation by cutting wages and prices by 40 percent.

But he couldn't get inside the Democratic Convention, much less on any ballots.

Roden and Howell lived uneasily at Mount Carmel in the early '80s while Lois Roden led the Branch Davidians. When Howell moved in with Lois Roden, though, things turned nasty. Roden accused Howell of raping his mother. He threatened Howell, a threat the younger man took seriously when Roden sometimes carried a semi-automatic Uzi while making his rounds.

Howell left in 1984. The rest of his followers eventually did likewise. They settled in Palestine, living in 8-foot by 12-foot plywood boxes.

Roden, though, still yearned to lead the Branch Davidians. He devised a plan in 1987 to settle once and for all who should be the cult's prophet. Roden dug up the body of Anna Hughes from the cemetery at Mount Carmel, storing the casket inside a shed. Roden then issued a challenge to Howell: the man who raised Hughes from the dead would be the Branch Davidians' true prophet.

Photo of body

Howell and his followers asked the McLennan County Sheriff's Department to arrest Roden for corpse abuse.

Officials demanded proof, such as a photograph of Hughes' body.

Howell and seven men, all dressed in camouflage fatigues sneaked onto Mount Carmel on Nov. 3, 1987, supposedly to take such a photograph. They carried assault rifles. When daylight came, a shootout ensued. Deputies, notified by neighbors, broke up the skirmish.

They filed charges of attempted murder against Howell and his followers.

Although the Branch Davidians claimed to be carrying weapons for protection, they put 18 bullet holes into the small tree Roden hid behind.

Prosecutors had a fatal flaw in their case, however.

Their chief witness was Roden. He came to the courtroom straight from the county jail, where he was serving a six-month sentence for filing legal motions asking God to inflict AIDS and herpes on Texas Supreme Court judges.

The contrast between Roden and Howell and his followers was not lost on the jurors.

Howell's followers clogged the third floor of the McLennan County Courthouse. Most of the women wore dresses to their ankles and blouses buttoned up to their necks. They clamored around their men during breaks. Children clung tightly to their mothers.

The group's devotion to Howell was total.

Visiting Judge Herman Fitts quickly learned to whom the Branch Davidians answered.

Before the trial started, Fitts asked if there were any witnesses in the courtroom who needed to be sworn in. No one arose. Howell's attorney Gary Coker intervened. He turned to the Branch Davidians in the gallery, urging potential witnesses to stand. Again no one got up.

Howell, smiling slightly, then stood.

"It's all right," he said, raising a hand. "You've done nothing wrong. Stand."

The doubt parted and the witnesses stood.

In contrast, deputies led Roden into the courtroom. He told of trying to raise Anna Hughes from the dead and with not a hit of chagrin admitted ending a prayer, "In the name of George B. Roden, amen."

Charges dropped

The jury acquitted Howell's followers. It could not reach a verdict on Howell. Charges against him were later dropped.

Jurors said Roden frightened them.

Assistant District Attorney Denise Wilkerson summed up the prosecution's case bluntly, "I think the trial came down to a sympathetic cause on one side and George Roden on the other."

Coker also thought the trial came down to how jurors viewed the Branch Davidians and Roden.

"Our witnesses are nice people with no criminal record who don't believe they're Jesus Christ," he said, without a trace of irony.

With George Roden in jail, the Branch Davidians settled back into Mount Carmel. Roden had let it slide. The tiny houses lining the dirt road into the property had fallen into disrepair. Junk cars abounded like weeds. Much needed to be done.

Nights of Bible study

Branch Davidians got an early start. At 5:30 a.m., the men got up, exercised, then ran an obstacle course Howell designed. While they ate breakfast, the women exercised and ran.

Days were devoted to shaping up Mount Carmel.

Nights were devoted to Bible study — and to Howell.

And the nights were long. Howell usually slept until about 2 p.m. There was no set time for the Bible studies to begin. To Marc Breault, who had become Howell's confidant, it seemed the studies began when everyone else was exhausted and Howell was ready to go.

Bible studies sometimes lasted more than 15 hours.

"You don't have time to think," said a former cult member, who fears Howell and asked not to be named. "He doesn't give you time to think about what you're doing. It's just bang, bang, bang, bang, bang."

Sometimes, Howell would practice his guitar, at full volume, until 2 or 3 in the morning, then call a Bible study, former cult member Lisa Gent remembered.

"On the night of Atonement, we managed to get to bed at 11 p.m.," she said. "At 1 a.m., Vernon ran through the camp ringing the food bell, making an awful racket. We had to come and eat as he himself had not had food that night. We were compelled to study with him until 5 a.m."

Howell's influence over the Branch Davidians, as Judge Fitts had seen, was eerie. They were awestruck by his seeming mastery of the Bible's mysteries. It wasn't as if they were all idiots. Wayne Martin was an attorney. Don Bunds was a design engineer; his wife Jeannine, a nurse. Breault would earn a master's degree in religion in 1988. All, though, pledged allegiance to a man far less educated than themselves, who professed to have a ninth-grade education.

There was just something about Howell.

Karl Hennig, a school teacher from Vancouver, British Columbia, saw it when he stayed with the cult for two months in 1987. A Seventh-day Adventist, Hennig found Howell quick-witted and the holder of "a truly amazing accumulation of knowledge."

In the daily Bible studies, Howell spoke rapid-fire, and Hennig found his message hard to pin down. Often, Howell asked a barrage of rhetorical questions, leaving his followers baffled as to how to answer — few daring to think there might be no answer.

Complete confidence

Howell's voice exuded complete confidence. He had an answer for every question.

If he sometimes seemed bizarre, well, prophets were supposed to be that way. Didn't Isaiah run around barefoot and naked for three years- Howell roamed back and forth across the chapters of the Bible, arcane Biblical references rolling off his tongue. Before the listener could grasp what had just been said, he was on to something else. It was like a roller-coaster ride: thrilling, but it was almost impossible afterward to say what you had seen or heard.

But Howell's followers got hooked on the feeling — that sense of glimpsing truth, even if it was awful and apocalyptic. Some compared it to a drug.

You felt like you were in the know, said a former cult member. Others, in the world, might consider you average. Let them. They were unbelievers. But you knew something they didn't — something that put you into the ultimate In Crowd, the ones who wouldn't be taking a dip in the Lake of Fire.

And that was the importance of the Seven Seals.

The Seven Seals, found in Revelation and written in apocalyptic language, herald the catastrophic events — famine, pestilence, a great war against Israel, the martyrdom awaiting God's followers — that many Christians believe will mark mankind's doom.

Howell told cult members that he, as Cyrus, was the Lamb that Revelation says will reveal the Seven Seals.

If they followed him, he would lead them through the coming tribulations. They would supposedly be martyred, but ascend to heaven, former cult members said. Then they would return and slay the unbelievers or the Babylonians, as Howell called them.

Eternity awaited, if you could just grasp Howell's message.

What struck Hennig most about cult members was their numbing fear of never understanding Howell. They couldn't just turn to the Bible and read for themselves. As Howell had shown time after time in studies, the Bible's language was much too dense for them to interpret. They were lost without Howell. He was the fulcrum of the Branch Davidians' belief.

Almost their God

"I don't think anyone ever knew what his understanding was, honestly," Hennig said. "If you had given them pencil and paper, I don't think they could have written down his message. They might have a piece here and there."

The Branch Davidians, though, had become convinced that they would not get to heaven unless Howell showed them the way.

They came to believe Howell and not the Bible, said Lisa Gent.

He had almost become their God.

Hennig would later write, for a psychology paper at the University of British Columbia, "Generally in the quiet evenings, an introspective, self-absorbed malaise seemed to overshadow the place as individuals perhaps contemplated their own grim future. The only consolation was that the world would get it even worse."

Read more from Part Two —



The Sinful Messiah: Seven Seals key to Vernon Howell's power

A guide to the names

Vernon Howell — Cult leader. He joined the Branch Davidians in the early 1980s. In 1984, cult members acknowledged him a prophet. Followers believe he will lead them through an apocalyptic future to salvation.

Marc Breault — Former confidant of Howell's. Broke away in 1989, moving to Australia. He has devoted much of his time since to debunking Howell's message.

Perry Jones — Longtime Branch Davidian and father-in-law of Howell. He served as pastor when Howell married his 14-year-old daughter, Rachel, in 1984.

Lois Roden — The cult's prophetess before Vernon Howell. Both she and Howell acknowledged a sexual relationship, despite a 40-year difference in ages, said former cult members. From the relationship, Howell gained standing as a prophet.

George Roden — He lost the power struggle with Vernon Howell over leadership of the Branch Davidians. He had control of Mount Carmel, the cult's home near Waco, until he ran afoul of the courts by writing lewd legal briefs.

Gary Coker — Waco attorney who in 1988 successfully defended Howell and seven followers accused of trying to kill rival prophet George Roden.